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The author at Camp Grant.

The American soldier is Divisional Interpreter Umberto-Gagliasso.

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UNDER THE GERMAN SHELLS

BY

EMMANUEL BOURCIER

MEMBER OF THE FRENCH MILITARY COMMISSION TO AMERICA

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH

BY

GEORGE NELSON HOLT

AND

MARY R. HOLT

WITH PORTRAITS

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1918

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PREFACE

LIFE is a curious thing. In time of war Life is itself the extraordinary and Death seems the only ordinary thing possible for men.

In time of war man is but a straw thrown into the wide ocean. If the tossing waves do not engulf him he can do no more than float on the surface. God alone knows his destiny.

This book, *Under the German Shells*, is another instance of war's uncertainties. Sent by my government to America to join the new American army as instructor, I wrote the greater part of the book on the steamer which brought me. The reader will, perhaps, read it when I am dead; for another steamer is about to carry me back to France, where I shall again be "under the German shells," before the book will see the light.

This is the second work which I have written during the war. The first, *Gens du Front*, appeared in France while I was in America. I wrote it in the trenches. The second will ap-

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pear in America when I shall be in France. The father will not be present at the birth of either of his two children. "C'est la Guerre."

My only wish is that the work may be of use. I trust it may, for every word is sincere and true. That it may render the greatest service, I wish to give you, my reader, a share in my effort: a part of the money which you pay for the book will be turned over to the French Red Cross Society, to care for the wounded and assist the widows whom misfortune has overtaken while I have been writing. Thus you will lighten the burden of those whom the scourge has stricken.

I hope that you will find in the work some instruction—you who are resolutely preparing to defend Justice and Right and to avenge the insults of the infamous Boche.

I have no other wishes than these for my work, and that victory may be with our united arms.

EMMANUEL BOURCIER.

CAMP GRANT, December 16, 1917.

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Emmanuel Bourcier at the front in the sector of Rheims in 1915 . . . . . *Facing page* 118

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Under the German Shells

I

THE MOBILIZATION

ONLY those who were actors in the great drama of the mobilization of July, 1914, in France, can at this time appreciate clearly all its phases. No picture, however skilful the hand which traces it, can give in full its tragic grandeur and its impassioned beauty.

Every man who lived through this momentous hour of history regarded its development from a point of view peculiar to himself. According to his situation and environment he experienced sensations which no other could entirely share. Later there will exist as many accounts, verbal or written, of this unique event as there were witnesses. From all these recitals will grow up first the tradition, then the legend. And so our children will learn

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a story of which we, to-day, are able to grasp but little. This will be a narrative embodying the historic reality, as the Iliad, blending verity and fable, brings down to us the glowing chronicle of the Trojan War. Nevertheless, one distinct thing will dominate the ensemble of these diverse accounts; that is, that the war originated from a German provocation, for no one of Germany's adversaries thought of war before the ultimatum to Serbia burst like a frightful thunderclap.

At this period there existed in Europe, and perhaps more in France than elsewhere, a vague feeling that a serious crisis was approaching. A sense of uneasiness permeated the national activities and weighed heavily on mind and heart. As the gathering storm charges the air with electricity and gives a feeling of oppression, so the war, before breaking forth, alarmed men and created a sensation of fear, vague, yet terrifying.

To tell the truth, it had been felt for a long time, even in the lowest strata of the French people, that Germany was desirous of provoking war. The Moroccan affair and the incidents in Alsace, especially that of Saverne,

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made clear to men of every political complexion the danger hanging over the heads of all. No one, however, was willing to believe what proved to be the reality. Each, as far as possible, minimized the menace, refused to accept its verity, and trusted that some happy chance would, at the last moment, discover a solution.

For myself, I must admit this was the case. Although my profession was one that called me to gather on all subjects points of information which escaped the ordinary observer, in common with the rest I allowed my optimism to conceal the danger, and tried always to convince myself that my new-found happiness need fear no attack. I had "pitched my tent." At least, I believed I had. After having circled the globe, known three continents and breathed under the skies of twenty lands, my wanderlust was satiated and I tried to assure myself that my life henceforth was fixed; that nothing should again oblige me to resume the march or turn my face to adventure.

Alas! human calculations are of little weight before the imperious breath of destiny.

I closed my eyes, as did all my country-

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men; but to shut out the storm was impossible. Mingled in all the currents of public events I felt the menacing tempest and, helpless, I regarded the mounting thunder-clouds. All showed the dark path of the future and the resistless menace of 1914.

I see again the Paris of that day: that fevered Paris, swayed by a thousand passions, where the mob foresaw the storm, where clamors sprang up from every quarter of the terrible whirlpool of opinions, where clashed so many interests and individuals. Ah! that Paris of July, 1914, that Paris, tumultuous, breathless, seeing the truth but not acknowledging it; excited by a notorious trial* and alarmed by the assassination of Sarajevo; only half reassured by the absence of the President of the republic, then travelling in Russia; that Paris on which fell, blow after blow, so many rumors sensational and conflicting.

In the street the tension of life was at the breaking-point. In the home it was scarcely less. Events followed each other with astonishing rapidity. First came the ultimatum

*The trial of Mme. Caillaux for the murder of the editor of *Le Figaro*.—TRANSLATOR.

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to Serbia. On that day I went to meet a friend at the office of the newspaper edited by Clemenceau, and I recall the clairvoyant words of the great statesman:

"It means war within a month."

Words truly prophetic, but to which at that moment I did not attach the importance they merited.

War! War in our century! It was unbelievable. It seemed impossible. It was the general opinion that again, as in so many crises, things would be arranged. One knew that in so many strained situations diplomacy and the government had found a solution. Could it be that this time civilization would fail?

However, as the days rolled on the anxiety became keener. One still clung to the hope of a final solution, but one began little by little to fear the worst. In the Chamber of Deputies the nervousness increased, and in the corridors the groups discussed only the ominous portent of the hour. In the newspapers the note of reassurance alternated with the tone of pessimism. The tempest mounted.

At night, when the dinner-hour came, I returned to my young wife. I found her calm

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as yet, and smiling, but she insistently demanded the assurance that I would accompany her to the seaside at the beginning of the vacation. She had never before asked it with such insistence. She knew that, in spite of my desire, it was impossible for me to be absent so long a time, and other years she had resigned herself to leaving with her baby some weeks before I should lay aside my work. Generally I joined her only a fortnight before her return to Paris. This time a presentiment tortured her far more than she would admit. She made me repeat a score of times my promise to rejoin her at the earliest possible moment. In spite of my vows she could not make up her mind to go, and postponed from day to day our separation. At last I had almost to compel her to leave; to conduct her to the train with a display of gentle authority. She was warned by an instinct stronger than all my assurances. I did not see her again until thirteen months later.

Abruptly the storm broke. It came with the suddenness of a thunderclap. The happenings of this period are a part of history. It is possible, however, to review them briefly.

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It was announced that the President of the republic, abandoning his intended visit to the King of Denmark, would return precipitately to Paris, just as the Kaiser, terminating abruptly his cruise along the Norwegian coast, had returned to Berlin.

I went to the station curious to witness this historic return. The approaches were black with people, and an unusual force of police protected the entrance. The interior was decorated as usual with carpets and green plants, but most unusual was the throng there gathered. One noticed, in addition to the numerous officials, many notables little accustomed to going out of their way to see affairs of this sort. I still see clearly the gray-clad figure of M. Edmond Rostand, the distinguished author of *Cyrano de Bergerac;* the eager face of M. Maurice Barrès, and many others.

The presidential train arrived precisely at the announced hour. The engine, covered with tricolor flags, had scarcely come to a stop amid clouds of steam, when the parlor-car opened and the President appeared. He was immediately followed by M. Viviani, at that

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time president of the Council of Ministers, who had accompanied M. Poincaré on the Russian visit. The two advanced to M. Messimy, minister of war, shook his hand and then those of the other officials. I looked with deepest interest on these men on whom fate had placed a responsibility so sudden and so heavy. They appeared calm, but it appeared to me the countenances of both were pale as if they realized the gravity of the moment and the weight of their trust. Whatever their feeling, only the most commonplace words of greeting were uttered, and the group at once proceeded to the exit.

Here something out of the ordinary occurred. Though I should live a hundred years, the scene would remain undimmed before my eyes. In my memory there is no similarly indelible picture, in spite of the fact that in the course of my ten years in the army I had witnessed a considerable number of remarkable spectacles. Even at the funeral of President Carnot, or that of President Félix Faure, even at the visit to France of Czar Nicholas II, even at the Congress of Versailles after the election of President Poincaré or any of the great public

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events of our national life, I had not seen anything with so dramatic a note as the occurrence of this instant.

Leading the procession, the President came close to the barrier which restrained the crowd of privileged persons, who had been allowed to enter the station. Not a sound had been made, when, sudden as a lightning-flash, the silence was rent by an intense cry from thousands of throats. It swelled immediately, was taken up by the throng outside, echoing and reverberating, till it became a tonal torrent, capable, like the clamors of the Romans, of killing the birds. And this cry was:

"Vive la France!"

It was so strong, so powerful, and, in these circumstances, so poignant, that there was a wavering, a hesitation on the part of all. Even the horses attached to the carriages, and those of the cavalry guard, seemed to thrill at its fervor.

While the carriages filled and the escort, with sabres flashing, took its place, the same acclamation, the same cry, deep and powerful, continued to roar, in its fury demonstrating better than any deed the national will, and

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expressing it in a manner so intense and precise, that any Boches in the crowd (and there certainly were many) must at this moment have felt the abyss opening beneath their feet; that the horrible adventure into which their Emperor was hurling them was destined to hasten their fall rather than assure their triumph.

Through this crashing human concert the escort moved forward. The crowd, however, was so dense that the carriages were not able to open a passage, and it was as in a living wave, with men and horses in a confused mass, that they reached Rue La Fayette, where at last they were able to disengage the presidential cortège from the still shouting throng.

In the crowd left behind, a remarkable patriotic demonstration spontaneously developed under the leadership of two noted deputies, M. Galli and Admiral Bienaimé, chanting the "Marseillaise" and acclaiming France.

Now let the war come! Unity dated from this instant.

From this hour the war imposed itself on every one. Each Frenchman resolutely prepared himself. The Miracle, that wondrous

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French miracle which was to stupefy the world and arrest the enemy at the Marne, this sublime display of strength on the part of a France seized by the throat, was born, under German provocation, at the Gare du Nord, in this furious shout, in this cry of passionate love:

"Vive la France!"

From that evening each family felt itself warned, each man felt his heart grow stronger, and each woman lived in shuddering anticipation.

Throughout the land there gushed forth a will to battle, an admirable spirit of resolution and sacrifice, on which the enemy had not counted, that he had not foreseen, and which all his power could not conquer. France, insulted, provoked, assailed, stood erect to her foes.

This period was brief. People followed in the papers the energetic move for peace undertaken by France and England, but the day of wavering was past. War, with all its consequences, was accepted. The national sentiment was unanimous, and the mobilization found the public ready in spite of the shocks inseparable from such an event.

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The most serious of these which I recall, was the assassination of Jaurès, the great Socialist leader, in Rue Montmartre. Although several of the newspapers, and particularly the Italian press, printed that I was in the party of the great tribune when he was killed, the statement was inexact. I learned of the assassination shortly after it occurred, and with several of my associates hurried to the scene. The moment was tragic and the tense state of public feeling caused an immense throng to swarm the boulevard. I was able, nevertheless, to reach the office of l'Humanité and, with others, to write my name in homage to the fallen one.

Already history was on the march. The national defense was in organization, and each individual had too many personal preoccupations to give even to the most legitimate occupation more than a few brief minutes of attention. For myself it was necessary to think at once of the rôle of soldier, which I was reassuming.

I hurried to my home. In the empty apartment I assembled my military equipment with the skill of an old stager; the compact baggage

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indispensable to the trooper, which should serve all his needs while taking up the smallest space, and add as little as possible to the weight of his burden. The experience I had had in the trade of soldiering, the expeditions in which I had taken part (the campaign in China, where, for the first time, I had as companions in arms the splendid soldiers of free America; my journeys into Indo-China and the Sahara), enabled me to know, better than most others, the essentials of the soldier's personal provision; what must be chosen and what rejected, and the precise size limits by which a useful article should be judged indispensable or abandoned because too cumbersome.

I provided for myself accordingly without waiting for the official call. In consequence I was able to devote my last free hours to some of my less experienced neighbors. Among these, two poor fellows interested me particularly. They were brothers, one of them recently married, who, by uniting their savings, had just opened a shop not far from my home. They had watched with dismay the coming of the tempest, and questioned me incessantly, hoping to find in my answers some words of

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reassurance. I was able to give only such answers as increased their fears, and to add advice which they would not heed.

"Imitate me," I said to them; "the war is inevitable. Buy some heavy shoes and thick socks. Provide yourselves with needles and thread. One always needs them, and too often one hasn't them when the need is greatest," etc.

They wouldn't listen. They continued to worry and do nothing, refusing to the end to accept the terrible reality, closing their eyes to the spectre as if they had a premonition that they were destined to be crushed in the torment and both killed; which, as I have since learned, was their fate within the first month of the war.

In the meantime I had to write consoling letters to my wife, abandoned at the seaside, amid a populace shocked and bewildered by the thunderbolt, and lacking definite news to satisfy the anxious need which saddened each individual.

But I was a soldier. I had to rejoin my command, and I had only enough time to pay a farewell visit to the home of my parents,

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where my brothers, ready like myself, awaited me with their wives and children.

Such an unforgettable repast. The paternal table surrounded by the group of sons and grandchildren, each still forcing himself to smile to hearten the others, each in the bottom of his heart wondering anxiously what the morrow would unfold. Several of those who on this final evening partook of the food prepared by their mother, or touched their glasses and drank "A la France," "A la Victoire," will never return. They have fallen on the field of honor, battling the odious invader, breasting his blows and giving their lives that their sons may remain French and free. No one knew who would fall, who would be alive a year, even a month later, but one would have looked in vain for a quiver in any eye or a tremor in any voice. All were French. All accepted their duty, however it might present itself; each in his rank, in his assigned place; to do simply, without discussion, without hesitation, whatever the threatened country might demand of its children.

We had the courage to laugh, at this last dinner. We heard our father recall the mem-

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ories of the other war, that of 1870, in which he had served as a volunteer, and then we separated with words of au revoir and not good-by on our lips.

We were keenly conscious that everywhere in France, in all the homes and in all the families, an identical scene was presented at that instant. At each table the mother offered the departing ones a farewell repast; the wives repeated their vows of affection, and the children gave their tender love. Every one swore to make the Prussian pay dearly for his provocation, to chastise his insolence, to arrest him, cost what it might, and to defeat him. One entered the drama without effort and almost without hatred, because it was unavoidable, because France called and it was necessary to defend her. One was sure of the right, that the cause was just, and without discussion one obeyed. French blood—the blood which has flowed in so many wars, the blood of Bouvines, of Valmy, and of Jena, the blood of the Revolution and of 1870—surged in the veins, quickened the pulse and grimly expressed itself:

"They shall not pass!"

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The night of the second of August seemed short. For myself, my preparations completed, I retired early, well aware of the fatigues to come; a little shaken, it must be admitted, at the thought of leaving, for a time which might be long, an abiding-place where I had tasted so much of pure happiness and calm joy with my young wife and our pretty baby.

Adventure, the great adventure of war, of journeys, of battles, and of blood: Adventure left behind so short a time before, as I had believed, forever, had seized me again and thrown me as an insignificant atom into the path of the unknown, breaking all the bonds whose forming had given me so much joy, and whose stability had seemed so humanly sure.

When the hour arrived for my departure, I contemplated my deserted apartment, and gave a last kiss to the pictures of my absent loved ones. Then, in marching attire, my light sack on my shoulder, I descended to the street with firm step and heart beating high, to begin my journey to the front.

The animation of the streets was extraordinary. All Paris seemed to have turned out

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to form an escort for the soldiers. These latter were easily recognized by the stern resolution of their faces, quite as much as by the accoutrement they bore. Most of them were accompanied by parents or friends; those who were alone were constantly saluted by the crowds as they passed. Many people offered their carriages to the soldiers, and others had placarded their motors with announcements that they would carry mobilized men to the stations without charge. Around these machines there was an ever-increasing crowd.

I entered this human wave. Immediately one dropped the manner of civilian life and became a soldier. By an old French habit, obligatory in the barracks, all the men replaced their formal speech by the intimate forms—*le tutoyer*—reserved ordinarily for one's family and intimate friends.

Costumes of all sorts were there; the long coat of the workman, business suits, peasant blouses, bourgeois jackets with a touch of color given by the occasional red or blue uniform. Hair-cuts were in equal variety, from the tousled head of the peasant lad and the waving curls of the student to the closely cropped

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state of those who had anticipated the military order. At the station all was well ordered. The trains, requisitioned before our coming, and with directions clearly indicated by placards, were quickly filled. Throughout the cars the men were singing and shouting, giving assurance of triumph, of prompt return, and of chastisement for the Boche. The coaches were covered with inscriptions naïve and gay.

"Excursion-train for Berlin."

"Round trip to Germany."

"Good fellows' compartment-car."

And a hundred others, many accompanied by satirical drawings, showing occasionally real talent on the part of the caricaturist. At the hour fixed all moved forward. All these men departed, singing; starting on their journey toward battle, toward glory, and toward death, while along the way, in the gardens or at the doors of the houses, the women, the children, and the old men waved their hands and their handkerchiefs, threw kisses and flowers, endlessly applauding, in a warm sentiment of love and of recognition, those who went forth to defend them.

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No one, perhaps, of all those who departed, of all those who saluted, believed that the war would be long, that it would involve the world and become what it now is, the battle for human freedom, the battle to death, or to the triumph of democracy over autocracy.

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II

THE INVASION

A SHORT time before the advent of the world catastrophe, Mr. Nicholas Murray Butler, president of Columbia University, was in France. I had the pleasure of meeting him in Paris. He gave me the first copy, in French and English, of the report of the American commission of inquiry concerning the Balkan atrocities. This report was made for the Carnegie Foundation, and he asked me to spread the knowledge of it, as far as possible, in my own country. I believed then that I was doing well in drawing from this interesting work a comparative study, which chance, rather than choice, caused to appear in the *Grande Revue*, in its number of July, 1914, only a few days before the outbreak of the great war itself.

I could not think, in writing this study, that it would precede by so very short a time events much worse, and that the Balkan atrocities,

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which were already arousing the conscience of the civilized world, were about to be surpassed in number and horror at the hand of one of the nations claiming the direction of modern progress: Germany! No, I could not dream it, nor that I would be so soon a witness of it.

Let us return to my strict rôle of soldier, from which I have digressed. The digression was necessary, however, for it will make more comprehensible the amazing situation which the war created for me. At the time the mobilization took place I was accustomed to the wide liberty of action, of thought, and of speech which is usually enjoyed by the writers and artists of France. In public places as well as in certain drawing-rooms, I met the most illustrious personages, both French and foreign, whose presence gives to Paris much of its unique charm. My own signature was sufficiently well known to attract attention, and life opened before me full of attraction. Suddenly, from the fact that a demoniacal fanatic had killed the Archduke Ferdinand and his wife in the little, unknown town of Sarajevo, the conflagration flamed forth. I abandoned everything which, up to this time, had con-

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stituted the essential part of my life; everything which had seemed worthy my attention and care, to become, on the morrow, an unknown, a soldier of the ranks, a number almost without a name, without volition of my own, without individual direction.

This was, it still is, a great renunciation. To really grasp its meaning, one must experience it himself. However, by reason of the importance assumed gradually by the World War, by reason of the enormous number of men called to the colors of every country of the globe, the feeling which I experienced at that time has become part of the common lot, and before the end of the tragedy, the majority of our contemporaries will have experienced it to a greater or less degree.

My order to report for duty directed me to go to Caen. It is a lovely town in Normandy, rich in superb monuments, of which one, "Abbaye aux Hommes," is an almost unequalled marvel of twelfth-century architecture.

I arrived in the evening, after a fatiguing journey in a train packed with mobilized men, who had already dissipated all social differences by the familiarity of their conversation. Im-

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mediately on our arrival we entered the barracks. As there was not nearly enough room for the throng of recruits, my company received the order to join another in a temporary camp, whither we hastened at full speed with the hope of being able to sleep. This new lodging, unfortunately, contained no conveniences whatever: it was a riding-school, where the young people of the town learned horsemanship, and which offered us for bedding nothing but the sawdust mixed with manure which had formed the riding-track. It must be confessed that one would need to have a large measure of indifference to be entirely content with this lodging. The unfortunate civilian clothing, which we were still wearing, suffered much from the experience.

Dawn found us all up and moving about, each one hunting, among the groups, those who, through mutual sympathy, would become more particularly "comrades," or, to use a word more expressive, more characteristically French, "companions," those with whom one breaks bread.*

The crowd was composed of the most diverse

* "Les compagnons—ceux avec qui on rompt le pain."

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types, but the greater number were from Normandy. Most of these Normans were farmers, many of them well-to-do; a few were dairymen and others horse-dealers. The rest of the company was Parisian. It is the custom in recruiting the French army to mix with all the contingents a certain percentage of Parisians, thus scattering over all of France, and particularly along the eastern frontier, the influence of the country's capital. In the French army the Parisian has the reputation of being an excellent soldier; very alert, of great endurance, light-hearted, and agreeable, with a keen sense of humor which sweeps away gloom and dispels melancholy. He is also a bit hot-headed and does not yield readily to discipline. The leaders know the admirable results they can obtain by appealing to the vanity or the sentiment of the Parisian, and that he is capable of almost any effort is freely admitted. They fear, however, his caustic humor, his facile raillery and his eternal joking, which sometimes endanger their prestige. At least, these ideas existed before the war. Under the fiery tests of these three years, all differences of thought have melted as in a terrible

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crucible; and there has been brought about a national unity so intimate and so absolute, that one would not know how to make it more perfect.

Among my new comrades the differences due to birthplace were quickly noted. By the costume, the accent, or the general manner it was easy to identify the native of the Calvados, of Havre, or of Paris. Already these affinities played their unfailing rôle, and in the general bustle the groups formed according to their origin. In the meantime every face showed that species of childish joy which always marks the French when they abandon their individualities and become merged in a crowd, as in the army. Their naturally carefree spirit comes to the surface and colors all their thought and action. They cease to feel themselves responsible for the ordering of their lives, and leave all to the authority which controls them. This enables them to throw aside all thought of their immediate needs, and permits them, at whatever age, to recover a youthfulness of spirit which is a perpetual surprise to strangers, and which constitutes one of their chief racial charms. Released from

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all care, they jest freely on all subjects, and their spirit of quick repartee, their gifts of observation and of irony develop amazingly—perhaps to excess. They are just children, big children, full of life and gayety, who laugh at a joke and delight in a song; big children who will suffer every fatigue and every pain so long as they can retain their *esprit*, and whom one may lead into any danger if one knows how to provoke their good humor.

War did not in the least change all this. While perhaps most of the troop had done little more than go through the motions of slumber, and every one had missed something of his customary comfort, no one seemed tired when next morning's reveille came. Each improvised an occupation. One built a fire between two stones that he might heat water for the soup, another prepared vegetables, a third helped the quartermasters in their accounts, and still another volunteered to help arrange the uniforms which were heaped up in a barn commandeered to serve as a storehouse. In a short time the issuing of uniforms commenced. In his turn each soldier received his clothing, his equipment and all the regula-

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tion baggage. And such scenes, half comic, half serious, as were enacted when the men tried on and adjusted their hurriedly assembled attire! Gradually, however, the long and short, the lean and rotund, by a series of exchanges, achieved a reasonable success in the transformation, and the variety of civilian aspect gave way to a soldierly uniformity.

At this period, in spite of all the efforts to secure a modification of the garb of the French soldier, the uniform still consisted of the celebrated red trousers and the dark-blue coat. This too gaudy attire was a grave error, soon to be corrected by stern experience. The red trousers dated from about 1830, and had acquired prestige in the conquest of Algeria and the wars in Mexico and Italy. To it also attached all the patriotic sentimentality aroused by the struggle of 1870. So strongly intrenched was it in popular fancy that it had triumphed over its most determined foes, and this in spite of the lessons regarding the visibility of the soldier, furnished by modern combats such as the Boer War and that between Russia and Japan. In consequence, the whole French army, excepting certain special troops such

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as the Chasseurs, the Marines, and a few others, started for the front in this picturesque but dangerous costume. On its side, it cannot be doubted, it had a certain martial pride, a pride so notable that it was remarked by the Romans at the time of the conquest of Gaul. This sentiment of sublime valor makes the French prefer the hand-to-hand combat, in which they excel and where each shows the exact measure of his bravery, rather than the obscure, intrenched warfare for whose pattern the Boche has turned to the creeping beasts.

Therefore we were clothed in this glittering fashion. However, as if the visibility of our uniform had already disquieted our leaders, they concealed our red head-gear by a blue muff which completely covered the cap. It was in this attire that the company formed, that the ranks aligned and the two hundred and fifty civilians of yesterday became the two hundred and fifty soldiers of to-day; two hundred and fifty soldiers of right and justice. In like manner millions of others, scattered through all the depots and barracks where invaded France was arming herself, girded

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their loins and burnished their arms for the sacred work of defending their homes.

Although few details are visible to the individual lost in the crowd, I feel sure that none of us even tried to see beyond the affairs of the moment. Certain things we could not help knowing: The war had already reddened our frontiers. Invaded Belgium battled desperately. Liége resisted. King Albert, his court, and the Belgian Government prepared Antwerp for a prolonged defense. Our comrades of the covering troops on one flank had invaded Alsace, and on the other had advanced to Charleroi. In the meantime, we, the soldiers of future combats, busied ourselves with preparations for our rôle with hardly a thought for the struggles already under way, or those of the future; this future so terrible which awaited us. We were more occupied in choosing our comrades than in considering the far-reaching possibilities of such incidents as the escape of the German cruisers *Goeben* and *Breslau*, and their subsequent internment at Constantinople. No, all that we learned from the newspaper dispatches interested us far less than the organization of our squads and platoons.

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I had the luck to find some good comrades, one the son of a celebrated novelist, the other an artist of some repute, and we three amused ourselves in observing our new surroundings and trying to foretell our next military moves. Our officers engaged our careful attention, as is natural in such circumstances. Our captain, as the chief of our company, a brave man, slightly bewildered by the astonishing rôle which had suddenly fallen to him, was the object of our special interest. We had the keenest desire for a chief who knew his trade so thoroughly that he would be able to lead us without trouble in whatever crisis. The soldier is ever thus. Without saying a word he examines his officer, measures his qualifications, and then reserves his confidence until the moment when it is made certain that this confidence is well placed and he need no longer fear the necessity of revising his judgment. This judgment which the soldier passes on his chief is definite, almost without appeal, so rare is it that circumstances will later cause a modification.

These early days, it is true, did not give our captain any opportunity to demonstrate

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his valor. Burdened with an important physical task, that of transforming into soldiers more than two hundred men who had left the barracks years before; of clothing each according to his measure; of answering all the questions of the higher officers, and of watching at the same time a hundred little details—he was so busy that we had relatively little opportunity to study him. We were already armed, equipped and placed in the ranks before we had caught more than a glimpse of him; and then suddenly came the order to move the regiment to C——, one of the most important seaports of France.

To entrain a regiment of three thousand men with its baggage, its horses, its wagons, its stores, and its service, has become mere play for our strategists of to-day. To call it a heavy task would make one smile, for it now appears so simple. At the period of which I speak, the month of August, 1914, when our defense was hardly organized and when the enemy rushed on, driving before him the terrified populace, it was not, by long odds, the simple problem of to-day. The railroads were congested, there was a shortage of cars, and

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orders were not always certain of prompt execution.

Nevertheless, in spite of these circumstances, the regiment entrained, departed, reached its destination without losing a minute or a man. We reached our assigned place at the scheduled time, just as if this tour de force had been planned for a long time or had been made easy by habit.

We arrived thus in our garrison without knowing each other, but none the less completely equipped and accoutred, although less than four days had elapsed since the mobilization call had been sent to these three thousand men, most of whom had forgotten all but the rudiments of their military training. This miracle of execution was reproduced throughout our territory, and after three years of war there has not arisen a single voice to claim that the French mobilization failed in any detail, or that in either plan or execution it fell short of perfection.

This was in reality a remarkable achievement. It must be here noted that France was prepared for the war neither in spirit nor in material. Most of our citizens were pacifists,

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who refused even to acknowledge the possibility of a war. Yet, when confronted by the inevitable, each brought to the task an abundant good-will and an enthusiastic patriotism which gave speed and efficiency to each act of the mobilization. This was in truth the first step, the beginning of the "Miracle of the Marne." It was indeed a miracle, this splendid co-ordination of good-will and eager effort into an organization, enormous but almost improvised, which worked without clash or creaking, with an almost mathematical ease that could not have been assured to a method prepared and perfected by the most careful study.

After all, we were not destined to remain long in our new post. In fact, we were hardly installed when an order came which placed us once more on the train, and sent us at last to the frontier. We were delighted.

Imagine, for the moment, these three thousand men recently armed, barely organized into squads and led by officers as yet unknown, starting on their way to meet the enemy. It was for them a veritable *début*. They were still unaware of the tricks and brutality of the

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German. Very few of us had heard more than the vaguest discussion of the theories of Bernhardi and the Teuton "Kriegspiel." We knew little of what was happening in Belgium, of the desperate efforts of the heroic defenders of Liége, or of the atrocities committed by the invaders. There was no time to study and explain the horrors of this war which threatened to submerge us; no time to instruct the soldiers; no time even to wait for munitions. Speed was necessary. We must hasten to offer our bodies, in the effort to check the black wave which advanced so ominously.

It was not a war which came. It was an inundation. The numberless German host, rolling on like a wave of mud, had already covered Belgium, submerged Luxembourg and filled the valleys of Lorraine. No one knew if there would be time to check it. The army of the front was fighting, no one knew just where. The English army was not yet ready, the Belgian army, that heroic handful was giving way, and the French mobilization was hardly finished. And here we were, rolling on at full speed along the lines of the Eastern Railway, to reach as soon as possible the fron-

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tier of the Aisne, with two hundred rounds of ammunition in our pouches and two days' rations in our sacks.

We went where we were sent, passing trains of terror-stricken refugees; speeding without stop along the sentinel-guarded way; passing Paris, then Laon, and finally arriving in the middle of the night in a darkened city; a terror-torn city, whose people gathered at the station to receive us as liberators, acclaiming our uniform as if it were the presage of victory, as if it betokened a sure defense, capable of rolling back the threatening enemy and giving deliverance from danger.

Poor people: I see them still in the touching warmth of their welcome. I see them still, as they crowded about to offer us refreshing drinks or bread and eggs, and following us clear to the fort which we were to defend, and which they believed would protect the city from all attacks.

Here we were at last, at our point of rendezvous with that grim monster: War. The men of the regiment began to look about, and especially I and my two friends, to whom I was already bound in one of those quick sol-

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dierly friendships. We were ready to suffer together, to share our miseries, and to give an example to others. Because of our social position and education and our superior training, we felt capable of indicating and leading in the path of obedience. However, neither of my friends was able to follow the campaign to the end. A weakness of constitution ended the military career of one, while the other suffered from an old injury to his legs. At this early moment neither wished to think of his own sufferings. They dreamed only of France and the need she had for all they possessed of strength and courage. In spite of their goodwill and stoutness of heart, neither of them was able to endure the strain of military life for any considerable period. A soldier should be a man of robust physique and unfailing morale. He should be able to withstand heat and cold, hunger and thirst, nights without sleep and the dull agony of weariness. He should have a heart of stone in a body of steel. The will alone is not enough to sustain the body when worn by fatigue, when tortured by hunger, when one must march instead of sleep, or fight instead of eat.

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All these things I knew well. I had served in war-time. I had marched on an empty stomach when drenched by rain or burned by the sun. I had drunk polluted water and eaten the bodies of animals. I had fought. I knew the surprises and hazards of war; hours on guard when the eyes would not stay open; hours at attention when the body groaned. I knew the bark of the cannon, the whistle of bullets, and the cries of the dying. I knew of long marches in sticky mud, and of atrocious work in the midst of pollution. I was a veteran of veterans, earning my stripes by many years of service, and therefore ready for any eventualities. My gallant comrades knew little of all this. Instinctively they looked to me for instruction, and placed on me a reliance warranted by my genuine desire to help them, as well as my long military experience.

Up to this time, however, the war had not shown us its hideous face. Our immediate task consisted of placing in a state of defense an old, dismantled fort here on the edge of French territory, and our orders were to hold it as long as possible, even to death. We were only a handful of men assigned to this heavy

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task, of which, it is true, we did not realize the importance.

Under the orders of our commander we hurriedly cut down the trees which had overgrown the glacis, made entanglements of branches, and helped the artillerymen to furnish and protect their casemates. Oh, the folly of this moment, superhuman and heroic! We had only a dozen cannon of antiquated model to defend a defile of the first importance, and there was neither reserve nor second line to support our effort.

Before us developed the Belgian campaign. The battle of Charleroi was under way. In the evening, after supper, when we went down to visit the town and find recreation, if possible, we heard the inhabitants discuss the news in the papers as tranquilly as if these events, happening only ten leagues from their door, were taking place in the antipodes, and as if nothing could possibly endanger them and their interests.

Trains bearing the wounded passed constantly through the station. Those whose condition was so serious that they could not stand a longer journey were removed from the

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trains and taken to the hastily improvised hospitals. This we saw daily, and so did the people of the town. We saw Zouaves, horsemen, and footsoldiers return, blood-covered, from the battle; frightfully wounded men on stretchers, who still had the spirit to smile at the onlookers, or even to raise themselves to salute.

Still, this town, so close to the battle, so warned of its horrors, remained tranquil and believed itself safe. Every day endless motor convoys passed through on the way to the front, bearing munitions and food without disturbing this calm life. Shops were open as usual, the cafés were filled, the municipal and governmental services were undisturbed in their operation, and the young women still pursued the cheerful routine of their life, without dreaming of the coming of the Uhlans and the infamy the German brutes would inflict.

Thus passed the days. We soldiers organized our habitation, placed the rifle-pits in condition, repaired the drawbridges and redressed the parades.

Ah! how little we knew of fortification, at this period, so recent and already so distant!

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How little we had foreseen the manner of war to which the Germans were introducing us. We knew so little of it that we did not even have a suspicion. We expected to fight, certainly, but we had in mind a style of combat, desperate perhaps, but straightforward, in which cannon replied to cannon, rifle to rifle, and where we bravely opposed our bodies to those of the enemy. We were confident. We reassured any timorous ones among the townspeople, saying: "Fear nothing. We are here."

We were stupefied, civilian and soldier alike, when the French army suddenly gave way and rolled back upon us.

In the ordinary acceptation of the term this was a retreat. The regiments, conquered by numbers, by novel tactics, and by new engines of war, drew back from the plains of Charleroi. I saw them pass, still in good order, just below the fort, our fort where the work of preparation continued. Each soldier was in his rank, each carriage in its place. It was at once magnificent and surprising. We questioned these men with the utmost respect, for we envied them. They came from battle, they knew what fighting was like, and we could

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see a new flash in their eyes. They were tired but happy. They were covered with dust and harassed by fatigue, but proud of having survived that they might once more defend their native land. Most of them could tell us but little, for they had only the most confused notion of what had happened. They were witnesses, but they had not seen clearly. A formidable artillery-fire had mown down their comrades without their seeing an enemy or even knowing definitely where the Germans were. They had advanced and taken the formation of combat, when, suddenly, the storm broke upon them and forced them to retreat. They were so astonished at what had befallen them, that one could see in their faces, almost in the wrinkles of their garments, the mark of the thunderbolt.

They marched in extended formation and in excellent order, remaining soldiers in spite of the hard blows they had borne. They kept their distances, their rifles on their shoulders, their platoons at the prescribed intervals, the battalions following each other as in manœuvre and bringing their pieces of artillery.

It was an uninterrupted procession, an even

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wave, which rolled along the road without cessation. Some stragglers entered the town and they were anxiously questioned. They could tell only of their exhaustion and of small details of the fight, describing the corner of a field, the margin of a wood, the bank of a river: the precise spot where the individual had entered the zone of fire and had seen his neighbors fall. This one had marched up a hill, but couldn't see anything when he got there; another said his company had tramped along singing, when suddenly the machine-guns broke loose and his friends fell all about him; a third told of joining the sharpshooters, of throwing himself on the ground and, "My! how it did rain." One tall chap recalled that in the evening his company had withdrawn to a farm-house where they paused for a bite to eat, after which they made a détour. Such were the scraps of information they gave, minute details which told nothing.

All these stories were a jumble. None of these combatants had truly seen the war. Each knew only what had happened to himself, and even that he could not explain. These men seemed to have just awakened from a night-

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mare, and their disjointed words told us nothing. We, who listened with such tense interest, were tortured with the desire to know if the tide of battle was bringing nearer the chance to prove our valor.

We were eager for the fray. All our forces, physical, mental, and spiritual, hungered for the combat. Our tasks of the hour were insipid. This incessant felling of trees, this clearing away of brush, this myriad of fussy efforts put forth for the refurbishing of our antiquated fortress, held us in leash until the place seemed like a suffocating tomb, whose cave-like quarters we would never leave.

In the town the people grew restless as the French armies fell back. They knew no more than we of the outcome of the battle of Charleroi, but as they saw the endless procession of convoys, of soldiers and of fugitive civilians, they began to fear the worst.

The German drive increased in power. Now, Belgian soldiers began to be mixed in the swift stream of the fleeing. Hussars, guides, infantry, and linesmen, clad in picturesque uniforms, copied from the first French empire, poured by in disorder. Some were

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mounted on carts; others afoot, were leading their foundered horses; and these haggard, mud-covered men brought an air of defeat. Their faces, sunken from hunger and distorted from lack of sleep, told a story that sowed terror and kindled a panic.

The invasion presented itself at the gates of the town with an unforgettable cortège. Fear-stricken men deserted their fields, taking with them such of their possessions as could most quickly be gathered together. All means of transport were employed. Vehicles of all types and ages were piled high with shapeless bundles of bedding and of clothing of women and children. Some of the unfortunates were pushing perambulators, on which they had heaped such cooking-utensils as they had hurriedly gathered up. Trembling old men guided the steps of their almost helpless wives. Many had left their tranquil homes in such haste that they had not taken time even to fully clothe themselves. With weeping eyes, quivering lips, and bleeding feet they stumbled on. One heard only words of terror:

"They kill every one."

"They have killed my mother."

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"They have murdered my husband."

"They are burning the houses and shooting the people as they try to escape."

Can you imagine such a sight? And this never for an instant ceased. Three roads joined each other at the edge of the town, and each brought from a different direction its tales of horror. Along one came the families driven from the colliery shafts, another brought the fishermen from the Scheldt, and the third the bourgeoisie from Mons and Brussels. All marched pell-mell along with the troops, slept at the roadside, and ate when some interruption on the congested route offered the opportunity. All fled straight on, not knowing whither.

I found reproduced in this lamentable exodus certain spectacles which I had witnessed years before, but under vastly different circumstances. Yes! I had seen things just like this, but on a far-away continent where the fugitives were not men of my own race. I had seen cities taken by assault and whole populations fleeing in terror. I had seen houses in flames and corpses rotting in the fields. I had seen all the drama and horror of an invasion and had looked

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on with infinite pity. However, nothing in all that had touched me as did the present. Those flights had not taken place in my own country. They were not my compatriots who had been harried like so many animals, and driven from their homes like frightened beasts, to be tracked in the forests or hunted across the plains. They were, nevertheless, poor, unfortunate humans. Even in their panic and distress they were still a little grotesque, owing to their strange manners and costumes. Their natural abjection had in it nothing of similarity to the fierce grief of these Europeans, surprised in a time of peace and in no way prepared to endure submission.

Once when I saw an exhausted old man fall at the roadside, near our fort, and heard him beg his companions to abandon him that they might make better speed, I recalled a scene indelibly graved on my memory. It was in China. We were moving toward Pekin in August, 1900. We pushed back before us the Boxer insurgents, whom we, with the Japanese and the Russians, had routed at Pei-Tsang. One evening when hunger tortured us, some companions and myself started out in search

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of food. We reached a farm isolated in the midst of a rice-swamp, and we entered, just as armed men, conquerors, may enter anywhere. There was not a soul in the numerous buildings of the extensive plantation—or so it seemed at first. Finally, I went alone into one of the houses, and there came face to face with a very old woman, shrivelled and bent, with straggling wisps of hair, grimacing and repulsive. She instantly thought that her last hour had come. I had no bad intentions, but she could read my white face no better than I could have read her yellow countenance had our positions been reversed. She was overcome with fear, and her fright caused such facial contortions that I had a feeling of deepest pity for her. I tried without success to reassure her. Each of my gestures seemed to her a threat of death. She crouched before me, supplicating with most piteous cries and lamentations, until I, finding no gestures that would explain what I wanted, left the room. She followed me as I withdrew, bending to kiss each footprint as if to express her gratitude for the sparing of her life.

At that time I had thought of what my own

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grandmother would feel were she suddenly confronted by a German soldier in her own home in France. My imagination had formed such a vivid picture that I remembered it fourteen years later when the real scene passed before my eyes.

Ah! Free men of a free country! Men whose homes are safe from invasion, men who need not dread the conflagration leaping nearer and nearer, or the lust of your neighbor—fortunate men, imagine these villages suddenly abandoned; these families in flight; these old men stumbling on the stones of the road; these young girls saving their honor; these children subjected to the hardships and dangers of such an ordeal!

Search your mind for a picture which may aid you to visualize such a spectacle. For no pen, no brush, not even a cinematograph could depict that terrified mob, that throng pushing on in the rain and the wind; the flight of a people before another people, the flight of the weak and innocent before the strong and guilty.

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III

THE MARNE

AS the result of tenacity and strenuous effort, our work of defense progressed. We had been able to build a smooth, sloping bank all around the fort, to place entanglements before the principal entrance, and to arrange such cannon as we had at our disposal. We put iron bars in front of the windows to break the impact of shells, and baskets filled with sand at passage entrances. We had sufficient provision to last a month. We built a country oven that we might bake bread and not be reduced by famine.

We were tired, but confident, the enemy might come now. Each of us knew the spot he should occupy on the rampart, and we had not the least doubt of our power of resistance. The commander redoubled the exercises and drills, and each day notices were posted near the guard-house saying that we must hold the fort unto death, that surrender was ab-

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solutely forbidden. As for the men, we were equally determined to offer resistance to the end.

In the meantime, we came to know each other better day by day, and genuine sympathies grew into solid friendships. In addition to my two friends of the first hour, I found myself associated with some excellent comrades. There was Yo, a splendid young Norman, strong as a giant, a carpenter by trade. He was persistently good-natured, and knew a thousand amusing stories. He had an anecdote or witticism ready for all occasions. Then there was Amelus, whom we dubbed "Angelus." With his little, close-set eyes, small features, narrow shoulders, he was as nearly as possible the physical type of a Paris gamin. He possessed also the gamin's quick repartee and unalterable good humor.

This man, who was killed later, deserves special mention. He was an anti-militarist. That is to say, before the war he constantly asserted, as a point of honor, in season and out of season, his hatred of the whole military business; and detested, without clearly knowing why, every one who wore an army uniform.

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When I first met him, the war had not yet changed his habit. He indulged freely in vituperation of the officers, from the highest to the lowest; but this veneer covered a truly patriotic spirit, for whenever an officer asked a service he instantly offered himself. He volunteered for every rough job, and although he was not strong nor of robust health, he managed to accomplish the hardest kinds of labor, and would have died of the effort swearing that he "wished to know nothing about it, and no one need expect anything of him."

This type of man was very numerous in France before 1914, and experience has proved that much could be counted on from them, whenever the occasion arose to put them to the test.

Such as he was, with his comic fury, with his perpetual tirades against the officers, and still very evident good-will, he amused us greatly. One heard often such colloquies as this:

"A man wanted to cut down trees!"

"Take me!" cried Amelus.

"A volunteer to carry rails!"

"Here I am!"

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Once accepted, bent under the heaviest burdens, he poured out his heart; he cursed his ill fortune, he pitied himself, he growled and groaned. That aroused the irony of Yo. There was a continual verbal tussle between the two men, the one groaning and the other responding with raillery, which spread joy among us all.

Yes, we laughed. The tragic events which were closing in upon us, which were drawing nearer irresistibly, did not yet touch us sufficiently to frighten us much. We laughed at everything and at nothing. We laughed like healthy young men without a care, men who have no dread of the morrow, and who know that, whatever may happen, the soup will be boiled and the bread will come from the oven when it is needed. We had not yet become really grave, certainly no one had suffered, when, our task of preparing the fort completed, we went to the embankment and witnessed the ghastly procession of fugitives. That froze the heart of each of us. So many old men, women, and children, thrown out at random, thrown out to the fierce hazard of flight, stripped of all their possessions! The

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sight was distressing, and the visible horror of their situation brought tears to the eyes of the most stolid.

The hours passed rapidly. The last French troops fell back, the town was evacuated. Trains packed to the last inch carried away every one who could find room. When we went out in the evening, we found closed the shops which had been open the day before. Their owners were hastening to find shelter and safety.

The enemy was approaching. We felt it by a hundred indications, but we did not suspect how close he had come.

He arrived like a whirlwind. One evening we were told to remain in the fort, to take our places for the combat, to prepare cannon, cartridges, and shells. During the day an aeroplane had flown over the fort, and it was a German machine. Disquieting news preceded the invader. It was brought by some straggling soldiers: men panting, miserable, dying of thirst and hunger, who had been lost in the woods, and had covered twenty leagues to make their escape. They recounted things almost unbelievable. They had seen Belgian

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villages as flaming torches, and they told their experiences little by little, with a remnant of horror in their eyes, and an expression of bravery on their faces. We gave them drink. They scarcely stopped their march, but took the bottles or glasses offered, and emptied them while continuing on their way. The fear of being taken bit at their heels. "Save yourselves!" they cried to the women, "they are coming!"

After they were gone, the people gathered in large groups, seeking further information on the highroad. The road was clouded with dust and alive with movement, where other fugitives, more hurried than the first, pushed their way, and threw out, in passing, bits of news still more alarming. Haggard peasants explained that the Germans were pillaging houses, ravaging everything. From these strange reports one would have believed himself transported into another age, carried back to the period of the great migrations of peoples.

"They have taken away my daughter," wailed a woman in tears, "and have set fire to the farmhouse."

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"They shot my husband!" cried another, "because he had no wine to give them."

The terror of the populace increased and spread. Mothers went to their houses, gathered together some clothes and their daughters, then followed the throng of fugitives. Old men started out on foot. The threatening flail swept the country, even before it was seen, preceded by a groan of agony and of fear as the thunder-storm is preceded by the wind.

And we soldiers, with no exact knowledge of the situation, we awaited orders and completed our preparations for resistance. We lifted the drawbridges, we put in place the ladders, the tubs of water to put out fire, the tools to clear crushed roofs and arches. We never thought of flight. We had a sort of pride in remaining at the last stand, in protecting the retreat of all the others, and we strove to give encouragement to the civilians departing. But we were eager for news, and seized upon all rumors.

About four o'clock in the afternoon a rumor passed like a gust of wind. Some outposts came running: "They are here!" They told of the attack on their position five kilometres

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away. Five of their number had been killed, six taken prisoner by the Germans. This time the invasion was rolling upon us. We almost touched it. We felt the hot breath of battle, we were going to fight, we were going to offer resistance.

This was an impression more than a certainty. Explosions could be heard in the distance: the engineers were blowing up bridges and railroads, in order to create obstacles and retard the advance of the enemy. The foe seemed to arrive everywhere at the same time. He was discerned on the right and on the left, at each cross-road, advancing in deep columns, and preceded by a guard of cavalry, the terrible Uhlans, who were plundering everything in their way.

We felt, rather than saw, the nearness of the invaders. We could do nothing but wait. In spite of the efforts exerted by the officers to quiet the men, there was among them an uncontrollable restlessness: inaction was intolerable.

It was a great relief to be able to accept, with several comrades, a piece of work outside the fort. This had to do with blowing

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up a viaduct. We set out, much envied by those left behind. We advanced with customary precaution, following one point of light carried by an advance-guard. Naturally, this position was taken by Amelus, the habitual volunteer, followed by Yo, the giant, whose muscular force inspired confidence in every one.

We had not far to go. At the railway-station, we learned that the last train had just left, taking away the portable property of the station, and all the people who could pack themselves into the coaches. There was no longer, then, any assurance of rapid communication with the rear. The struggle was really commencing.

Our destination was scarcely two kilometres away. It was a railway-viaduct crossing a valley. We arrived quickly. The blast of powder was prepared in an arch by the engineers; our part was only to watch and protect the operation. A sharp detonation, an enormous cloud of smoke, the whole mass swaying, splitting, falling, the reverberating echo, and the route is severed. The trains of the invasion will be compelled to stop: there

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is an abyss to cross, which will make the assailant hesitate perhaps an hour. Although our work was swiftly accomplished, it seemed that it must be effective. We had nothing to do but regain our fort and await events.

However, it is late when we arrive. Night has fallen. On our left, an immense glow stains with blood the leaden sky: it is Fourmies which is burning, fired by the enemy. It is a French town which is the prey of flames, the first one we have seen thus consumed before our eyes, in the horror of darkness; while on the highroad rolls constantly the flood of refugees, carts, wagons, carriages, all sorts of conveyances of town and country, jumbled together with bicycles and pedestrians, the turbulent throng of a province in flight, of a people driven by a horde.

In subtle ways the fort itself has changed character. It breathes war. Sand-bags are placed about the walls, sentinels watch on the ramparts, orders are given and received under the arches. Our comrades ask anxiously: "What have you seen?" We give an account of our exploit, while eating a hurried bite, then we imitate our comrades, and, following the

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order received, we take up our sacks and prepare all our accoutrement.

There is still some joking, at this instant. Yo attempts some of his raillery, Amelus once more pours vituperation on the army, but their pleasantries fall without an echo. We are grave. The unknown oppresses us. We are attentive, and await the slightest order of our superiors. The commandant calls the officers together. The conference is prolonged, and we know nothing precise in the half-light of our fortress chambers. What is going on? Will we be attacked this evening? Will the defense be long? We exchange opinions and assurances: "There are two hundred rounds of ammunition apiece!"

Two hundred rounds! That means how many hours of fighting? Shall we be reinforced? Are there troops in the rear? And in front? No one knows. Those who affirm that there are troops in front of us meet a slight credence, which gives way immediately to doubt and then to a certainty to the contrary. Numberless contradictory pieces of information clash together, mingle, intercross:

"There is fighting at Maubeuge."

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"The enemy is withdrawing on the Meuse!"

"Yes, he has lost all his cannon."

"But he is advancing on us here!"

All these statements jostled each other in the general uncertainty. Suddenly, at the door of the chamber, I saw our lieutenant, a splendid soldier, upright and frank. He was speaking to one of my comrades. Scenting a special mission, I approach them. I am not mistaken. "Silence!" says the officer, "I need six resolute men, and no noise."

"Take me, lieutenant," I ask.

"If you wish."

"And me, too," begs Amelus.

"All right, you too, and Yo. Meet me immediately in the courtyard, with your knapsacks."

We meet in a few minutes. My friend Berthet rushes in. "Wont you take me, too?" "Certainly. Come quickly."

And now we are outside the fort, with knapsack and gun. We are delighted with this godsend, without knowing what it is all about: at least we are moving about, doing something, and that is the main thing.

"Be careful," commands the lieutenant, "to the right! Forward, march!"

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We leave by the postern gate. We are on the embankment. The night is dark, the heavens are black except where the blood-red reflection of burning towns marks the path of the Germans. In silence we make our way down the steep slope of the fort.

"Halt! Load!"

We fill the magazines of our rifles. Ten paces farther on we meet the last sentinels. The password is given, we proceed. We go toward the town, as far as the highroad, where the flight of the distracted populace continues. Amidst a tangle of conveyances, pedestrians slip through mysteriously and hurry by. They jostle us, then make way for us in the throng. At last we stop. The town is only a hundred metres distant, without illumination, but much alive, full of the hubbub of the last departing civilians.

"Listen," says the lieutenant, "this is your errand: a group of Uhlans has been reported about eight hundred metres from here. At this moment they must be occupying the civilian hospital. They must not be permitted to pass. Two men will hide themselves here, two others there. The others will guard the

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cross-road. In case you sight them, give them your magazine and fall back on the fort to give the alarm. Do you understand? Go to it!"

In such moments, one's intelligence is abnormally active: one understands instantly, and each man seems to take his own particular rôle by instinct. I advance with Berthet to take the most forward post: it is where adventure is most likely. The others leave us, to take their own positions. So there we are, he and I, alone as sentinels, at the edge of the highroad—the road which is the path of the invasion, where rolls unceasingly as a torrent the stream of fugitives.

"You tell me what to do," says Berthet, "I will take your orders." "It is very simple," I respond, "one knee on the ground. In the deep grass you will not be seen. For myself, I am going onto the road itself. I will stop any one who looks suspicious. Don't worry, and don't let your gun go off unless you hear me fire." "Very well." "Oh, another thing! If we are attacked, we will fire, then run for the fort without following the road. Our companions will fire, and we must cut across the fields. Do you agree?" "Yes."

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I leave him, to take my post just at the edge of the road, eyes and ears on the alert, finger on the trigger. A host of memories crowd my brain. How often in other days have I stood guard in just this manner! I recall similar hours which I experienced in China, at Tonkin, in the Sahara. I feel once more the intense poetry which is inspired by such a vigil: a poetry incomparable to any other; a poetry in which alert action is mingled with the strangeness of night, with the thousand noises of a stirring populace, with the imminence of danger, with visions crowding up from the past, with all that surrounds us and all that flees from us. Less than a fortnight ago, at this hour, I used to write my daily article. My young wife, in our dainty dining-room, was rocking the baby to sleep. Or I was correcting proof on my forthcoming book, and she came to sit near me, her fingers busy with some fine needlework. She always placed on my desk the flowers from the dinner-table, and I thanked her for being so good, so pretty, so loving and thoughtful, by a swift stolen kiss on her rosy finger-tips. I read to her the last page I had written. She smiled and ap-

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proved. Our confidence was complete. She had faith in my ability, I rejoiced to know that she was mine. We were so happy——

To-day, with loaded gun, with every nerve strained, I lie in wait for an advancing enemy. My wife is far away. She has shelter, at least. Without doubt she dreams of me, as I dream of her, and she trembles and she fears the future, the danger, death. My brothers—where are they?—and their wives, and our parents, and all my dear ones, like myself, like all of France, thrown into war, into danger, into suffering. And all the children, and all the helpless women, and old men, all counting on us, on our stoutness of heart, to defend and to save them.

My meditations did not in the least interfere with my watchfulness. From time to to time I stopped a passer-by.

"Halt there!"

"We are French."

"Advance slowly, one by one."

The poor creatures were terrified and bewildered.

"We are trying to escape!"

"Pass on."

After a bit I return to see Berthet.

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"Anything new?" "No, nothing." "Supposing you look around more at the left." "All right."

I resume my place. All at once, I hear the clatter of horses' hoofs. Berthet rejoins me. "Do you hear that?" "Yes. It must be they. Don't forget. Fire, then run across fields."

The cavalcade approaches, is clearly audible. With eyes strained, I can still see nothing in the blackness. Suddenly I catch the glitter of helmets.

"Halt, there!"

"Gendarmes!" cries a voice, "don't shoot!" French gendarmes, in retreat!

"Advance slowly, one by one."

The troop halts. One horseman advances, stops at ten paces from my bayonet.

"I am a brigadier of the gendarmes, brigade of Avor. I have not the password."

The voice is indeed French. I recognize the uniform—but I still fear a possible trap.

"Command your men to pass, one by one."

The order is executed without reply. Some ten men file by.

"Look out for yourselves," says the last horseman, "the Uhlans are at our heels."

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"Thanks for the information. Tell that to the officer whom you will meet about a hundred metres from here." "Good luck to you."

Ouf! Berthet and I both grow hot. The watching brings us together, we remain together. One feels stronger with company.

It begins to rain—only a mist at first, then a steady rain. The poor fugitives tramp along, miserable, driven ghosts, weird figures in the blackness of the night. Some of them give scraps of information in passing.

"They are at the chapel."

"They are arriving at Saint Michel."

"There are twenty Uhlans at the *mairie*."

Our lieutenant makes his round. "Nothing new?" "Nothing, sir." "Very well, I am going to look about, as far as the town. I will be back in about fifteen minutes." "Very well, sir."

He disappears, swallowed up in the darkness. We wait. It rains harder and harder. The water runs in rivulets on our shoulders, trickles down our necks, soaks our shirts. From time to time we shake ourselves like wet spaniels. There is nothing to do but wait. It would

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not do to seek shelter. Besides, there is no shelter. When one is a sentinel in full campaign, one must accept the weather as it comes. If it is fine, so much the better; if it is frightful, too bad! It is impossible to provide comforts, or conveniences. If the sun burns you or the rain soaks you, if the heat roasts you or the cold freezes you, it is all the same. The strong resist it, the weak succumb: so much the worse! One is there to suffer, to endure, to hold his position. If one falls, his place is filled. So long as there are men, the barrier is raised and put in opposition to the enemy. "*C'est la guerre.*" That is war: a condition in which only the robust man may survive; where everything unites madly to destroy, to obliterate him, where he must fight at the same time his adversaries and the elements which seem to play with him as the breeze plays with the leaf on the tree.

However, the night was advancing. The Great Bear, intermittently visible between the clouds, had already gone down in the sky, and we were still there. The crowd still surged on, as dense as ever. The people came from every quarter. Very few were gathered into

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groups. Here and there some worn-out soldiers were seen, who asked information and vanished in haste. In the background of the dark picture of the night were the burning villages and towns, but their flames were subsiding, their ruddy glow was waning. The fires seemed to have reached the end of their food, exhausted by a night of violence. Sudden puffs of sparks rising with the smoke already foretold their extinction.

Berthet, my comrade, was pale in the twilight dawn. "You have had enough of it?" I say to him. "Oh! no," he responds, "it is nothing but nervousness."

The most critical moment was approaching: the dawning of day, that troubled moment when fatigue crushes the shoulders of the most valiant, when the vision confuses distances and blurs objects, when all one's surroundings take on a strange, uncanny appearance. Dawn, lustreless and gray, the dawn of a day of rain, rising sulkily, drippingly, coming pale and wan to meet men broken by an anxious vigil, is not a pleasing fairy, is not the divine Aurora with fingers of light; and yet, it brings solace. With its coming the vision is extended; it

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pierces the fog, identifies the near-by hedge, the twisted birch, the neighboring knoll of ground. Day breaks. The shadows disappear, objects regain their natural aspect, and the terrors created by the night vanish.

Thus it was with us. I was pleased with Berthet. He had carried himself well, and I told him so. That pleased him. He was a boy whose self-esteem was well developed, who could impose upon a rather weak body decisions made by his will.

"I was afraid of only one thing," he said, "and that was that I might be afraid." I smiled and answered: "But you will be afraid. It is only fools who know not fear, or deny it. Every one knows fear. Even the bravest of the brave, Maréchal Ney himself, knew it well."

At this moment our lieutenant returned from his hazardous expedition, without having observed anything remarkable, and there was nothing for us to do but wait for other sentries to relieve us, or for orders specifying a new mission.

Nothing of the sort came, at first. If we had been abandoned in a desert, our solitude

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could not have been more complete. As far as the eye could see, we could not detect a living thing. There were no more fugitives. We two were guarding a bare highroad where neither man nor beast appeared.

At last, some one was seen coming from the fort. It was a comrade bringing coffee and news. While we were absorbing with delight the hot drink which seemed to make renewed life throb in our veins, he recounted the events which had taken place behind us, and in some manner under our protection.

"The boys," he said, "have left. The fort will be blown up. It seems that we have waited too long already. The Germans have gone by, now. We are surrounded. No one knows how those animals slip by, but there is fighting all around us."

"No! Is that true?"

"Truest thing you know. Last night we put mines in the powder-magazine. There are eight metres of fuse. We will light it on leaving. You are going to see some fireworks."

We did not know what to say, at first. We could not doubt the accuracy of the informa-

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tion supplied by our comrade, but Berthet's surprise was extreme. The most difficult thing, in war, is to be willing to comprehend nothing of what surrounds you near at hand, and to content yourself to live as does an animal. Always one tries to reason, to use logic, and nothing is further removed from reason and logic than important events in which one is plunged, but of which one sees but an infinitesimal part, too small to form even an approximate idea of the whole.

"How," says Berthet, "could the enemy pass by in force, without using this road?" I shook my head. "Who knows?" "I don't know how it was done," declared our comrade, "but they have passed us. As proof, three kilometres from here they took by surprise a squad asleep in a farmhouse. The Uhlans arrived without any one suspecting, and made them all prisoners."

A sharp whistle cut short our reflections. Our lieutenant called us. We joined him and found, at the turn of the road, the entire garrison, ready for departure. They were only awaiting the signal from the commandant. The ranks were formed, the captains were

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mounted on their horses, the lieutenants and the sergeants were overseeing the last preparations.

We took our places in silence, not having slept at all, and having had the sack buckled on our shoulders for twelve hours in the rain. The rain had not ceased. The troop was enveloped in it as in a gray veil, and the wet faces of the men expressed dejection. Their moustaches drooped, their caps were pulled down, their looks were sullen. Even Yo himself, with his unvarying good humor, could not find another word with which to revive the spirits of the men. Only Amelus could be heard growling somewhat more vigorously than usual.

Weather has an enormous effect on the morale of troops, as on all human agglomerations. We were all more or less touched by the malign influence of the rain. No jest flashed from the ranks as is usual in a French troop, where bantering springs from the lip involuntarily, where chaffing is as natural as the air one breathes, as necessary as bread. A regiment remains alert and strong so long as this spirit of optimism remains; but at the mo-

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ment of which I speak, when we were drenched with rain, when we saw our country invaded, when we knew ourselves to be surrounded by the enemy, we were morose and feared the worst. However, it was only necessary that there should be an unexpected peal of laughter to bring light to every face, and that was what happened soon after we were given the order to march.

Indeed, the column was scarcely in motion, when the irrepressible Yo burst forth with a raucous tone in one of the most ancient songs of the march, one of those which are transmitted from generation to generation. Instantly, another voice responded, then another, then a chorus. And then, in the downpour of rain, on a road so water-soaked that one sunk to the ankle at each step, it was no longer a surrounded regiment in flight, but a troop sprightly, gay, and confident and, like their Gallic ancestors, having nothing to fear but this: that the weeping heavens might really fall on their heads.

We had not been on the march an hour when a terrific explosion was heard, reverberating overhead. It was the mined fort which was

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blowing up. All the work of those last days was flying into the air in a re-echoing crash of bricks, ironwork, shells, and guns. Our labor was wiped out. Nevertheless, it had not been in vain. Thanks to its existence, the German army which had faced us had been retarded twenty-four hours in its advance. Indeed, their advance-guards had encountered that garrisoned fort, and had been obliged to await the arrival of artillery sufficient to reduce and take it. This delay had permitted the last French troops to retreat without trouble. They were safe when the fort, henceforth useless, blew up. It left nothing for the hand of the enemy, and its mission was accomplished. A battle would have added to our work nothing but blood. Our chiefs were wise in sparing that.

It was not until later that we knew all this. At that moment we did not look so far. We pursued our way singing, in a deluge of rain, overtaking distracted fugitives along the route: exhausted old men, women carrying and leading children, who moved aside to make way for us, then stumbled in our wake. We passed through villages already deserted, a forsaken

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countryside where the rain beat down the fields of barley and ripe wheat. On we went. In passing, we gathered fruit from the trees. At the fountains and springs we drank water made turbid by the rain. We sang. We heard, somewhere, the roar of the cannon. We had no idea where it thundered so. It seemed ahead of us and behind us. As we saw nothing terrifying, as there was no visible evidence of a battle, we advanced constantly, quite lighthearted, without knowing that we were passing through one of the great battles of the beginning of the war, one of the decisive struggles which did much to retard the advance of the enemy; that our column, quite ignorant of events, was thus marching freely across the battle of Guise.

That, at foundation, is not so impossible as might appear. Shortly after, we had occasion to verify such zones of silence in the midst of violent action. Yes, one may be in the midst of battle and not be aware of it. Even at Austerlitz the guard had not yet charged, half the troops had not broken a cartridge, when the battle was won.

This time our battle was to be gained by

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our legs, and consisted solely of marching. And we marched. And we took no account of fatigue, nor that the men who hastened along the road were all unaccustomed to marching. One month before, all of us were civilians. Some were in offices, bending over books; others sold dry goods, others were at work-benches or in construction-yards. We were required to make an unprecedented effort, to which none of us was trained. We were asked to march for hours, for a day, for a night, none knew how long. We must advance, cost what it might, follow an unfamiliar road, avoid ambuscades, regain the rear of our army, rejoin other formations which, farther on, were grouping under orders identical with our own.

We went on. The officers had their orders, we followed them. And we sang to drive away fatigue, to forget misery, to escape the thought of the heavy knapsack, of the cartridges dragging on our shoulders, of all the military harness, so useful but so heavy, which weighed down each step of the soldier. We crossed fields of freshly ploughed ground. We climbed slopes, descended hills, traversed plains. We went straight toward the south, covering on

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foot the route by which we had come to the fort in the train; a route which had become interminable, cut only by a pause every fifty minutes, when one could stretch his aching limbs, could pierce the swollen blisters on his heels, could break a crust of bread or drink a swallow of water.

Some civilians followed and attached themselves to us in the hope of protection. There were women who marched close to the ranks, others who confided their infants for a stage to near-by soldiers, still others gave up, exhausted, and fell on the stones, with eyes rolled back, full of terror and a sort of reproach. They felt themselves abandoned, too worn out to follow longer, given over to all the tragic misery of the invasion. And we turned our eyes that we might not see, in an agony of soul that we must leave them, that we could not help them, that we could not take them with us; ourselves crushed by the burdens of the soldier, hard pushed to arrive at a destination still so far away, at the spot selected for the halt, for rest, for sleep.

We went on, and fatigue began to weigh upon us. Some comrades suddenly quit the ranks, threw down their sacks with a wild

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gesture, and fell to the ground. They were the physically weak, those first overwhelmed by the burden, whom the enemy would gather up in his advance and take away prisoner, an easily won booty. The underofficers tried to make these men rise and continue their way, without much success. They were at the end of their strength, incapable of further effort. They gave up and fell. They accepted whatever fate awaited them. They had struggled to the extreme limit of endurance. One had marched for several hours with the soles of his feet entirely blistered away from the flesh; another had persisted though suffering intolerably from hernia. Some had foam on the chin. Several attempted suicide. Their firearms were taken from them and were given to another man to carry for a time. The latter soon threw them away because of their weight, first breaking them that they might not be of service to the enemy. Every one began to relieve himself of superfluous articles. We threw away linen and change of shoes; then rations. We emptied our pockets; discarded our jackets.

We marched, and marched, and marched: a march without end. There was no pause,

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no aim, no goal. We marched. We sought the horizon, and must push on still, as one horizon stretched away and gave place to another, which again must be passed as the first. The day lengthened. The road was never-ending. One after the other the hours rolled on, and still we marched. We encountered vehicles stuck in the mire, which no one attempted to help out of the ruts. We encountered horses in the last throes of agony, struggling one last time to move one foot before the other, then stiffening in death. We encountered automobiles in flames, others in smoking ashes. We encountered encampments of poor wretches, waiting at the edge of the road for a better hour. We encountered lost children. Here and there we came upon a house pillaged, devastated, bare, where remained no crust of bread, where even the wells had been emptied of water. With difficulty one could draw from them a little muddy liquid. The men chewed some beet-roots torn up in a field, to allay the burning thirst. Then night approached. We still marched. The twilight spread her veil of mist and blood. We marched. The shadows fell. We marched. Night came. We marched. We stumbled on the stones

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which seemed to rise from the road; over the wagon-ruts which cut it, on the slopes which bordered it. We marched. There were unexpected stops, when the column, suddenly halted at some point forward, folded back upon itself like a telescope. The men jostled and swore. Wagons were crushed, horses fell, in an indescribable confusion. Some soldiers fell, and did not rise again. Then the movement resumed. We marched again, and marched, and stopped, and went on.

There was no more singing. There was no more talking. Occasionally an oath. We discarded knapsack, clothing, food, even letters, in hope of relief, and marched on toward our goal with groans.

At last we stopped. We were in the midst of a black plain, lighted only by a few dim fires, where the mud was almost knee-deep. We threw ourselves down, broken, inert masses, without strength to spread a blanket on the ground, asleep before we touched the earth. We had covered seventy kilometres in one forced march, and no longer heard the cannon.

Thus we slept, like brutes, until morning. It was not long. The early light shone on a

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marsh made humpy by the bodies of men sleeping under the mist. There were soldiers of all departments of service; Zouaves, infantry, cavalry, artillery, fallen where they happened to be, without order, and all but a few still sleeping. These few had lighted large bonfires, where they warmed themselves. The light of the fires also attracted many women, children, and old men, who stretched toward the grateful warmth limbs stiffened by cold. The fires were fed with branches of trees, broken parts of wagons, anything ready at hand without too much effort to gather.

The result was a more or less comforting warmth for the benumbed creatures who crowded around, in a surprisingly promiscuous assemblage. Some were heating soup made from heaven knows what, others attempted to dry their shirts and blouses, soaked by sweat and rain. The rain had ceased, but the sky remained gray, covered with hostile clouds. The vision was limited by a low-hanging fog. On the road, the procession of retreat continued to roll, disordered, in nervous haste and at the same time slow. The underofficers reassembled our troop. We must start again,

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enter the column surging along the road, resume the flight, take up the march, press on still farther, and gain ground.

With the new day the cannon again began to roar. It seemed quite near, although one could not say exactly where the thundering came from. One felt hunted down, without knowing the location of the enemy who pursued so relentlessly. So the ranks were formed. Those who still had knapsacks lifted them again to the shoulder, and again we marched.

The first steps were difficult. Every joint was stiff, every muscle ached, and we swore with every stride. Soon we warmed up to the exercise and advanced more easily. The pace was set for five kilometres an hour, and every one followed.

Yo had found some wine, no one knows where. He poured a drop in the cup of each of his neighbors, and it seemed quite refreshing. We managed to keep going the entire morning. After a repose of two hours we started again, always toward the south, always pursued by the cannon, which seemed to move even faster than did we. We neared Vervins. The outlying parishes indicated it

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at each kilometre, and we were only surprised that the enemy had preceded us. It was nevertheless true. He went like the wind, regardless of broken bridges, obstructed roads, opened ravines. However fast we went, he went too fast even for us to follow. He was ahead of us and behind us. He was reported on both sides of us. He seemed to be everywhere.

This is the way of the retreat. However rapid it seems, it is exceeded in speed by the enemy. Every difficulty retards the troops in flight; obstructed roads, slow-moving army wagons, necessary destruction. The enemy pushes on. He sends forward his cavalry quite indifferent to the condition of the land. He takes strategic points, he occupies mountains, he bars passes. We must make a détour to cross a river over which he leaps. We must save munitions which weigh heavily and impede our course. We must watch for a safety which he disdains. He comes and breaks the embryonic resistance which he encounters, overthrows battalions already in rout, sweeps away regiments already disorganized. You believe he is behind, he is really in front. You go to the right, he is there. You return to

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the left, he has forestalled you. Those hours of torture, when difficulties accumulate to impede flight, when the mother's weakness detains the son, when the weight of a child is a crushing burden! Those hours of agony, when all about is burning, when terror is spread abroad, when only menace is seen on every hand! Those who have lived through such hours will never be able to efface them from the memory.

We arrived at Vervins, already attacked by the enemy, but defended by a screen of troops with some cannon. From the distracted town, where the detonations rocked the houses and made the window-panes rattle, one could watch the battle. Some aeroplanes were flying about overhead like great birds of war. They were the first military aircraft, still incomplete and badly armed. From them the observer could see but little, and he was obliged to descend to earth to bring his information. Such as these machines were, they interested us much, and seemed to fulfil in the air a remarkable mission.

Beyond this observation, the sight did not prevent some of us from seeking provision.

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It was already very difficult to find food in that town, where an army had passed. Practically nothing was left. The shops had wound up their business and their owners were preparing for flight. Everywhere were piled up furniture, scattered straw, torn paper. Nothing kept its usual course. One paid no matter what sum for two spoiled eggs. Berthet achieved a veritable triumph in discovering a pound of almond chocolate.

However, the soup was cooked on the kitchen-stoves in the houses. The quartermasters distributed meat and bread, at least as much as they could procure from the commissariat wagons which had stopped at the edge of the town. Some wounded men, returning from the fighting-lines, mingled with the men carrying wood and water. Some artillery wagons went through the streets at full speed, vainly searching some munitions gone astray.

In this general turmoil there came to hand an unfamiliar newspaper: it was the *Bulletin of the Army of the Republic*, which the minister of war had just established, and which was distributed to the troops. Every one, eager

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for news, obtained a copy and turned its pages rapidly, in the hope of gaining some definite knowledge of events. We read some reports of victorious progress in Alsace. The reading gave us some comfort and strengthened our courage. All was not lost, then, since the enemy was retreating over there! We exchanged words of confidence, we reassured each other: Germany would be beaten, that was certain. The Cossacks were invading Prussia, and our retreat signified nothing: we were at a disadvantageous point of the field of action, that was all! The enemy, hard pressed elsewhere, was going to retreat in his turn, and would be pursued to Berlin.

Laughter became contagious, and some joyous souls could not refrain from boasting. Our fatigue fell from us; we were again serene.

None the less, it was necessary to continue the movement already initiated, retreat still further, resume the march as soon as night had fallen, gain in all haste a point at the rear which had been indicated to our chief officers. We again took the highroad. It was still crowded, but only by the troops. The fugitive civilians were obliged to yield it to the army

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wagons and infantry, and themselves march across fields. They could be seen in long files, like migratory tribes, stopped by natural obstacles, entangled by hedges and hindered by watercourses. We passed without giving them aid; there was no time to stop. We were directed toward Laon, which we must reach at all cost, in order to organize the resistance before the arrival of the enemy.

Laon was far away, and the road was long, and the sack was heavy, and the march was at a bruising pace. We braced ourselves for endurance. Our faces, with several days' growth of beard, were streaked with sweat and dirt, were drawn and haggard from fatigue. We marched all night without arriving at our goal, then all day. It was evening when we reached the citadel perched on its rock, dominating a vast stretch of plain. We were installed in an entirely new barrack, and went to sleep without eating. We were not hungry, which was well, as there were no provisions. I threw myself on a bed and fell asleep like a clod. It would be light to-morrow, one could see clearly to-morrow; one could wash to-morrow, one could eat to-morrow.

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That was the way of it. All night the exhausted troop slept without sentinels, stomach empty, mouth open, in whatever position they happened to fall, utterly incapable of any defense. If the enemy had come, he could have swept away at a single stroke and without a struggle ten thousand men. There was not one of us who could have fired a shot.

This haste was important. It gave time to catch our breath. The army having escaped the German pursuit, saved its quota and could reorganize.

"Look at that steep bluff!" said Berthet to me the following morning. "It seems impregnable, does it not? Nevertheless, in 1809 Napoleon's Marie Louise Battalion took Laon by storm, from this side, and made a bayonet charge up those steep slopes, and dislodged the enemy."

As for us, we must first descend the declivity. The enemy was approaching. His scouts and advance-guards flashed through the plain in every direction. He gushed from the woods, he streamed along the roads, he inundated the fields. He came from everywhere, as if the entire earth had vomited Germans. They

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were innumerable as a cloud of locusts. It was more like a plague than an army. It was a barbarian horde pouring itself over our country and forcing us to retreat again; always retreat, always faster, without looking back and without offering resistance.

We set out once more, madness in our eyes. Would it never end, this flight? What was happening? What were our armies doing? Were we going to fall back as far as Paris? or perhaps still farther, as far as the Loire? We no longer knew what to think. We no longer possessed speech or ideas. The chiefs knew no more than the men. They no longer attempted to explain. Our lieutenant carried the knapsack of a man gone lame, and marched chewing a cigar. Our commandant went up and down the length of the column with a sombre air, and no one dreamed of singing.

These were the first days of September. The air was still hot and stifling. Some men, made giddy by the sun, fell in crumpled masses. Sweat ran off our bodies, rusted the arms in our hands. A suffocating dust filled the air and covered faces and clothing with an ever-thickening layer. Throats were parched, eyes haggard, shoulders bleeding.

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Berthet fell. I helped him up, he fell again. He could go no farther, and I feared that I would see him die there of exhaustion. I rubbed him, made him drink a little mint. Then I put him in the shade and went foraging. I discovered some water and a fresh egg, which I made him take. He swallowed it, only half conscious. Then I saw a resurrection. He sat up, light returned to his eye and color to his cheek.

Thus he was saved; but how many remained on the route, easy prey for brutal German soldiers, and how many died, their names unknown! The plains of Thierache and of the Aisne alone know how many fell by the way, victims of exhaustion, during the great retreat, when the foul enemy already scented Paris and believed it within his grasp; superhuman retreat, which spread for the foe the snare of the Marne, that miracle which the passing centuries will hold in remembrance.

Such was the retreat, from my view-point as a humble soldier of the ranks, from my position as an atom lost in the immense movement. Others will recount its strategic value; others will explain its grandeur. I have seen only what I have here related, I, a little cog

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in the huge tragedy, and I am proud to have lived those hours. Other great hours were to follow, but those passed through were not the least wonderful.

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IV

WAITING

WE took with us on our retreat some prisoners captured at Guise, during our frenzied flight; some dozen men, whom the gendarmes conducted, handcuffs on wrists. They excited much curiosity.

These soldiers did not give a very proud idea of the battle, nor of the enemy army. They were poor devils, dressed in gray, whose boots of tan leather alone drew attention. These looked very well, but were too narrow for the feet, and several men limped in a ridiculous manner.

Chained with them marched some civilians, marauders or spies, also being conducted to the rear. One of them attempted escape one night. Immediately retaken, one hour later he stood before a court martial, whose sombre appearance is graven on my memory.

It was a simple village house, with green shutters. A sentry stood at the door. Through the open windows one could see the tribunal

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in session, and the accused defending himself. The trial was brief and tragic. Five officers were seated in a commonplace dining-room, with an extension-table for a desk, at the end of which two clerks were writing. At the end of the room, in front of the buffet, some gendarmes guarded the accused. The contrast between the austere scene and its setting was striking. There a man was being judged, there his life or death was the subject for decision; and the cannon were roaring, quite near, and the retreating army was filling the village street.

I saw the man plead his cause, standing, gesticulating. The judges listened attentively and gravely. Not a muscle of their countenances moved; they seemed made of wax. Their caps made splashes of scarlet and gold on the table. On the wall behind the presiding officer hung a naïve picture of a country fête. The hanging lamp appeared to have been in the way: it was unhooked and put in a corner. I could plainly hear the voices, though I could not distinguish the words. The accused implored. He clasped his hands and fell on his knees. Then he uttered a cry. . . .

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The gendarmes dragged him away. His place was taken by another prisoner.

The next day, when we were leaving, he was missing. He had been shot at sunrise.

We finished the retreat by railway, finding a train which had come as far as a broken bridge and was turning back on its route. We were shut up in the carriages three entire days. Though it seemed an interminable journey, nevertheless it ended with our return to our starting-point.

This return, of a fantastic duration (our whole trip could be made in eight hours in time of peace) occupied the first days of the battle of the Marne. Yes, while the destiny of the world hung in the balance, while the most formidable struggle the earth had ever seen was in progress, we were packed into boxes on wheels, we were shunted about and loitered on the rails like so much useless merchandise. Our train moved, stopped, went into a station, departed, stopped again. We remained for hours on grassy tracks where no train had passed for months. We borrowed unfamiliar routes, we lost our way on unknown switches.

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Sometimes we stopped in a tunnel, or in the midst of a deserted countryside. Sometimes we halted at a town where the inhabitants crowded about us, bringing provisions of all sorts: bread, wine, meat, and fruit, and fêted us in a thousand ways. The people questioned us eagerly. The greater number had a son or brother in the army, and naïvely asked news of them. We had no information whatever, but exchanged assurances of an early victory. In spite of what we had seen, our confidence remained unbroken, and we gave much comfort to those who saw only disaster ahead. We maintained that the French advance continued constantly in Alsace, that the Germans were retreating everywhere, that the Russians were galloping on Berlin by forced marches. We were certain that Germany was rushing to suicide, and our certainty was eagerly demanded in exchange for the presents received. The sympathy of all these people was touching. It seemed as though we were all one family with these, our own French people, who were giving us so hearty a welcome. We felt so grateful for their reception that we would have liked to embrace them all.

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Then the train started. We exchanged hearty adieus as we went away—only to stop a little farther on for another lapse of time. After three full days of this we reached our destination. We had traversed half of France, and were now going to recuperate for new hardships.

Our camp was located in a little village buried in verdure, in the midst of a calm countryside, as far from the war as possible. Very little news reached this out-of-the-way spot; newspapers were old when they arrived. The populace lived as usual, groaning a bit to keep in countenance, but not suffering any real inconvenience.

We were soon bored to death. In spite of the daily exercises, in spite of the drills, in spite of the preparations and small side comedy of war, we longed for the tempest, for the great whirlwind which was sweeping away our brothers over yonder, toward the east. Only its echoes reached us. There was the Marne; there was the German retreat; there was the digging of trenches, the line stretched to the sea; there was the Yser.

Yet here we stayed. Time passed heavily.

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We felt much aggrieved: it seemed that the war was bound to be too short to offer us a sufficient revenge. We gave up hope of returning to the front, so long did the days seem while our comrades were doing the fighting.

Berthet and I never ceased to fret. Inertia crushed us. We would have accepted no matter what offer of an errand in order to go away, to have action, to quit the tranquil country where we were vegetating, to find again adventure, to run risks: in short, to live. It seemed to us that we spent months there, stagnating. In reality it was six weeks.

In that apparent inaction the regiment was putting itself in condition. One day twelve hundred men were selected for reinforcements to join a neighboring division of the army. There were touching farewells. Those who were leaving, feverish with joy, shook hands proudly with those who remained behind, and who were envious to the last man. None of these, however, was destined to return unharmed. All were mowed down on the plains of Champagne in their first engagement, and their places were filled by new comrades from other camps.

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That also is an aspect of war. One does not keep constantly the same comrades, nor even the same officers. The army is a living organism which undergoes constant wear and rebuilding. At first, one gladly believes that he will always have the same neighbors, that he will be with the same sergeant, that he will be surrounded by the same faces until the end. Then one comrade is transferred to another regiment, another merely disappears. Another is called to a distance: he goes and never returns. Soon one finds himself the only man remaining of the original group. The company has not fought, it has not suffered murderous losses, and still its personnel has been renewed.

Yo is gone. Amelus is gone. Happily, Berthet remains for me, and I for him. We will not leave each other. We believe it since we desire it, and we are almost sure that we will be able to mould the future to our wish; such is the immense vanity of man.

Thus we spent our days, soldiers without being soldiers, soldiers of time of peace, tied down to puerile exercises, to imaginary assaults, to supposititious battles. We champed

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our bits. We longed for the struggle, we awaited our turn with growing impatience.

It came at last. One evening the order to go forward arrived. The regiment was ready, solid, high-spirited, complete. It set out: all felt a secret thrill. At last we were going to the Front, we were going to know, to fight, and to die!

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V

LA PIOCHE

IT is night. It is raining. The train stops at a station. We have arrived. But where? No one knows. All is black. All is sombre. All is sinister. All is threatening. We alight from the carriages to stretch our legs.

"Silence!" growl the officers. "In two ranks, quick!" Along the platform we fall in line as well as possible in the dark, our knapsacks on our backs, and, over all, the rain.

"Forward."

We reach a road; a road that feels hard under the feet. A damp chill arises from the invisible earth and the rain glues our clothing to our skins. Our shoes are heavy with mud. We march. Each follows the comrade who stumbles along ahead, and whom one can hardly see. One hears only the rustling of the trees, the confused sound of steps, a brief exclamation, an oath. We go straight ahead where we are led; through the dark toward the unknown.

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"Silence!" hiss the chiefs, "we are close to the enemy. Not a word; not a cigarette."

A sort of apprehension grips us. The fear of the unknown binds us. It is not the certainty of danger: it is worse. It is an inexpressible anguish. One is in danger from invisible blows that will fall unawares. We mount a hill. At the summit one has a view, a darkly shut-in view, whose walls of black are pierced by flashes of fire; mere sparks in the distance. Artillery! This which we look down upon is the Front. There, below us, at a considerable distance still, they are fighting. With throbbing hearts, eager to advance, to arrive at the place destined for us, we peer into the cannon-starred curtain of the night.

But the march continues to be slow. One slips on the muddy ground, one skids, one swears. As we go down the hill the stirring sight is blotted out like dying fireworks, and we are once more in a shut-in road, whose embankments add to the blackness and cut off all outlook.

Nevertheless, the confused sounds of the battle carry up the slope to our marching troop.

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Somewhere, down there, a lively artillery duel crashes in fury and the brilliant flashes of light dart their resplendent triangles into the heavens. Is it there we are going? No one knows. One feels his heart thrilled and a little shaken by the nearness. Instinctively one touches elbows with his neighbor, tightens his grip on his rifle; becomes silent.

All the time we advance. Occasionally there are stops; sudden, unlooked-for stops. Then one starts on. Soon we reach some houses. We are entering the street of a village and the shaded lanterns cast weird shadows on the walls. The column crowds together. We catch our breath.

"We camp here," say the sergeants.

The orders are sent along the line. There is a moment of rest; then the squads break up. Every one seeks his place of shelter. We are quartered in the buildings of a large farm. I and my companions are billeted in a barn and we stamp our feet on the unthreshed wheat which has been stored there. Each begins hollowing out a place to sleep.

"Make no lights," order the sergeants, "you will be spotted."

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"Eh, boys!" calls a voice, "where do you come from?"

And from between the bundles of straw we see the up-lifted heads of several soldiers. Approaching them, we find that they have been comfortably sleeping in their straw nests, and that our arrival has awakened them. We question them:

"What is this place, here?"

"It is Taissy."

"Ah!"

"Is it far from the trenches?"

"Oh, no, mon garçon; only about fifteen hundred metres."

Then they tell their story. They are cripples, mostly lame, who are waiting for vehicles to take them back to the dressing-stations. They have been in the trenches for a month; they have fought; they give details of their battles. We do not see them. We hear only detached phrases which come to us confusedly out of the night.

"A dirty hole. We lost a heap of men."

"There's a fort up there which we recaptured."

"There were three counter-attacks."

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"Then, a dirty canal full of rotten meat. What a stink!"

Suddenly some furious detonations rend the air. Every one is silent. We listen.

"That's nothing," say the old-timers, "it's only our battery firing. But if the Boches answer you will see something!"

"Do they often reply?"

"Hell, yes! Every day. Half of the village is already pounded to pieces."

"Ouf!"

It is true. A comrade who has been prowling around outside comes back:

"The next farmhouse is demolished. The roof is gone and the walls are like a sieve."

"Silence!" growl the sergeants. "Go to sleep. You must fall in at five o'clock to-morrow morning."

The conversations cease. Each one picks out a place, buries himself in the straw, and sinks into sleep as a ship is engulfed by the waves.

It is our first night under fire. Perhaps some of us do not find untroubled slumber, but there is no alarm and to stay awake is useless. Besides, there is nothing to do but sleep. So we sleep.

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At dawn we are afoot. We can see that the war is not far distant. The near-by houses are disembowelled, and such walls as still stand are pierced by great round holes where the shells passed. Certain roofs seem like lace, their rafters blackened by fire and rain. We are curious, and run about that we may not miss seeing any of the damage done by the bombardment.

"Back to your quarters!" cry the non-coms. "To go out is forbidden."

We hardly heard them, and they had to use force to hold back the men and prevent their scattering in the village streets. The officers came to the rescue. Then we obeyed. Soon came the order to fall in, the roll was called, and as soon as the knapsacks were buckled to the shoulders we started on. We were going to the trenches.

The cannonade incessantly grew louder. We followed a road bordered with trees and masked by underbrush; a road leading toward the noise. Every eye sought for signs of this unknown thing into which we were marching. They were not lacking. Everywhere broken branches hung from the trees, and frequently

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we passed ruined houses whose peasant owners dumbly watched our marching troop. On we marched. We crossed a bridge and entered another village, a hamlet entirely deserted, mutilated, horrible to look at, like a wounded man lying on the ground. Its houses, after their years of tranquillity, had suffered a terrible assault. They were riddled with shells; their walls were like a moth-eaten garment. We could see the interiors still fully furnished; curtains still hanging at windows where all the glass had been shattered; half-open buffets, occasionally with their mirrors intact. Only a glimpse did we catch as we passed. Then we left the ruins and, for a time, followed a canal. This we crossed by a frail foot-bridge and found ourselves in a narrow ditch—a communication-trench—the first we had seen. We descended into the earth, following this narrow chink which reached to our shoulders and, at times, entirely concealed us. This boyau wound its way about, turning and zigzagging apparently without reason. We traversed it in single file, seeing nothing but the back of the man in front and the two walls of smooth clay cut perpendicularly to the bottom.

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It was a sight unfamiliar to all: an extraordinary journey, a thing of mystery, the entering of an infernal region where feelings of humanity were left behind.

Suddenly a rapid whistling passed over our heads, which were lowered in one simultaneous movement. Another followed, then another and, a little behind us, three explosions resounded with a noise like the tearing of silk amid a jangling of metals. We had received our baptism of fire.

We advanced more quickly in an eagerness to reach our underground home. We bumped the walls, sometimes so close together that our knapsacks stuck fast, so that we had to tear them loose with a considerable effort. All the time we shuddered at the nasty whistle of the shells, which passed to fall and crash behind. One felt that he must escape; must get out of this place where, if he remained, he was sure to be mashed like a strawberry in a marmalade. The march quickened so that we almost ran, staggering against the trench walls at every sudden turn of its meandering course and always, above us, that terrible screaming and those crashing explosions.

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Lord! But our cheeks were pale and our looks anxious. Later we stood it better as we became accustomed to it. This, however, was our first moment under fire, our first meeting with the foe, and we felt crushed by the narrow confines of this fissure in which we could only follow the column—a column without end, which straggled over too great a length in spite of the efforts of the officers to hurry the men and to close up the distances.

Suddenly we emerged into open ground. A railroad-embankment with its rails in place, its telegraph-poles still standing and occasionally a flagman's house still in good condition, hid us from the enemy. At one bound we glued ourselves to this embankment, flattening our bodies on the ground; for the German shells continued to lash the air, while out on the plain gray puffs marked their explosions.

Some comrades, whose easy gait showed their familiarity with the place, were already advancing toward us. They motioned to us and pointed out the dugouts.

"This way. Don't stay there."

We followed their directions on the run and

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entered by groups into the shelters they had indicated. Here, packed together so closely that we could not budge, we waited for the storm to pass. In the abri were some wounded on their way to the dressing-station, and we felt the deepest emotion at seeing the stretchers with their mangled and groaning burdens.

At last the firing stopped. We waited for orders. The sergeants were called together for instruction. Soon they came back and then our work began. We first laid aside our knapsacks and grouped ourselves by squads. Then we picked out tools from a long pile of shovels and pickaxes, and followed the non-coms along the embankment, a little nervous, it is true, but curious about the work we were to do.

"Two picks, one shovel," came the order. "Two picks, one shovel," repeated the sergeants as they placed us at our distances.

"Voilà! You are going to dig here. Loosen the ground with the picks and clear it away with the shovels. Do you understand?"

Then we went at the work. It was the beginning of our first trench. Gradually we heated up; we hacked at the soil; we shovelled

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it away; we spat on our hands; we struck again; we wiped away the perspiration. Occasionally some shells seemed to leap over the embankment and passed, screeching, on their way. We dodged at the sound and then laughed at our involuntary movement. Then we straightened up to catch our breath, and in the moment inspected our workyard and glimpsed the neighborhood. The embankment of the *chemin de fer* entirely protected us from the enemy. At a little distance two rows of trees marked the way of the canal we had crossed. Between the parallel lines of the canal and the railroad was a field of beets, humped in places with bodies of men that one had not had time to bury; while here and there crosses marked the fallen of the earlier days of the struggle.

We saw all this at a glance, and quickly bent ourselves back to the earth and our toil. Our rifles hampered us in our work, and we laid them on the freshly heaped-up earth, taking care to protect them from sand. We did not know why they were making us do this digging, or what good purpose was to be served by our labor; but we worked on unremittingly,

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proud to accomplish the necessary task, proud to be at work and to feel so calm in the midst of war.

"You are lucky," said one of the veterans standing near by. "The sector is calm to-day. You would not have been able to do that yesterday."

"Lively, was it?"

"You've said something. But tell me, have you come to relieve us? It's not a bit too soon."

"We don't know."

"It's likely that is what we're here for," added some one.

In reality, no; we did not know. They had sent us there and there we stayed. After all, no one seemed able to give us an explanation, and we didn't try to explain things ourselves. They told us to hurry and we hurried. That was all. In the meantime our tracks were burying themselves. The ditch was already knee-deep, and by so much it diminished the stature of each of the diggers. No one stopped us, so we kept on, digging furiously, as if the final victory depended on our effort of this moment.

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When evening came and twilight enveloped us in her soft, purple mantle, the violent note of the cannon barked only intermittently, and the gusts of bullets, wailing in the air, sounded like swarms of musical insects swiftly regaining their homes. We believed the hour of repose was near. But we were mistaken: another task awaited us. It was necessary to take advantage of the night to cross the embankment, gain the first line and take our position.

In these first weeks of intrenched warfare, movements of this sort were relatively easy. We were hidden in the darkness: we had only to leap the embankment and move to our places. The enemy replied only when he heard a noise, and fired quite at random. His commonest field-piece was the light seventy-seven, which barked loudly but did little damage, and the workmen of the two camps matched their skill at only a hundred metres' distance, without hurting each other very much.

This evening they placed us behind some trees at a roadside.

"Fire only on order," said the officers. "One of our companies is out in front fixing the wire. If you fire, you risk wounding your comrades."

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They repeated their instructions to the sergeants and thus began our first night at the front. Each one watched as well as he could, straining his eyes in the effort to pierce the blackness, hearing the blows of the mallets on the stakes and thrilling at the fusillade.

A night is long. A night in November is cold. It freezes. We shivered out there in the dark, but we did not dare to budge. The noise of shooting was almost constant, and bullets were striking everywhere about us, ringing on the stones, clipping twigs from the trees or sinking dully into the soil. Our teeth chattered; we shivered; we tried to warm our hands by rubbing them. Some rash ones stamped their feet to restore the circulation, and from time to time we heard a muffled conversation. We didn't know where we were nor the distance which separated us from the enemy. We feared a possible ambush, a surprise attack maybe, and we pinched ourselves to keep awake. The hours seemed deadly long.

At last we saw the dirty gray of dawn overspread the sky and slowly dissipate the thick mist that rose from the earth. Clumps of

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trees and underwood, little by little, took form. No sooner were they fully visible than a terrible fusillade broke out, lashing the air like a thousand hisses; a crackling shower of bullets that rolled and rattled like hail. They cut the branches just above us and made the pebbles fly. We crouched to the ground; buckling our sacks, gripping our guns, hunching our shoulders and tensing our legs to be ready for the expected attack.

"Get ready to go back," whispered the sergeants and the order was repeated along the line. We crept, we crawled like slugs, profiting by the smallest tuft of grass, the shallowest recess in the ground that might serve as a shield, but with little hope of escape.

Some furious discharges of seventy-fives cracked with such rapidity and precision that they comforted us. We felt sustained and protected and steadied ourselves. We were annoyingly hampered by our heavy equipment, our inconvenient cartridge-boxes and all our cumbersome accoutrement. Suddenly a man was wounded. He cried out, and, losing all prudence, arose, ran, crossed the embankment and fled to the shelter. Instinctively

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we followed his example. On the way another man was wounded and fell. Two of his companions seized him and, dragging him between them, struggled to safety, in the shelter of the railroad-bank. It was finished. We reassembled. We were muddy, bruised, and wounded; eyes red from loss of sleep, and mouths drawn, but, just the same, we were content. Thenceforth we were soldiers. We had faced danger. True, we had not fought, but we were ready.

Our rôle had just commenced. We had occupied this sector to fit it up as this novel thing, this underground war, demanded. This task achieved, we were to be its defenders. It was necessary to dig trenches that we might no longer watch from the scanty shelter of trees; to improve on these primitive holes that had been dug, to serve temporarily, at the beginning of the battle. Therefore we dug trenches. It was necessary to connect them with communication-channels. Therefore we dug boyaux. We had to install redans, build firing benches or banquettes* and construct

*The banquette is about eighteen inches above the pathway at the bottom of the trench. The men stand here when firing or when on guard.—TRANSLATORS' NOTE.

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dugouts. All these things we did. We dug in the earth day and night. We gathered up cubic metres of soil and threw them out in front to heighten our parapet. We used our shovels and picks; we sweat; we suffered; we froze.

The winter rolled on. December brought intense cold. Ice and snow covered the land, and while we watched the foe, our rifles froze in the loopholes. We ate when we were lucky. The kitchens were far in the rear, and when the soup and coffee arrived they were ice-cold. The service men started early with their mess-pails, but they stumbled in the trenches and often spilled more of the soup and wine than they brought. We ate badly; we slept little: we always dug. We never rested. There were heavy materials to be carried; the stakes for the entanglements, the spools of wire, the sheet iron, the posts, and the timbers. There was nightly patrol duty, the hours on guard, the attack to repulse, endless holes to be bored in the earth. In the daytime one slept where he could, curling up in the mud at the bottom of the trench or seeking to avoid the rain by crawling into some fissure. At night we stole

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out into No Man's Land and stalked the foe or dug a listening-post. We watched the illuminating rockets. We plunged to shelter when they threatened to expose us to fire.

We lived there some strenuous hours, some terrible weeks. Some suffered from trench foot, some froze to death, some were killed. These are terrible things: these nights on guard, these nights hugging the ground when on patrol, these nights in the listening-post when the body chills, becomes numb, and loses all sensation. One goes on detail and loses one's way. One falls, dumb with fatigue, and an alarm sounds. One starts to sleep and an attack rages.

War is a thing of horror. It is more. The very soil is hollowed out like dens of beasts; and into these creep human beings. The rain saturates the trench and rots legs and wood alike. The corpse hangs on the wire and serves as a target. War is cold, war is black, war is night. It is, in truth, such a horror that those who have lived these hours may say: "I was there. But to tell about it is to live it over again. And that is too much."

As for us, we suffered. At first we had no

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Emmanuel Bourcier at the front in the sector of Rheims in 1915.

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dugouts and slept beneath the open sky. We had no trenches and stalked our foe while waist-deep in mud. In December's cold we had no fire. This which we saw, which we defended, which the foe destroyed, was France. Our land was invaded, profaned by the German, and we could not retake it. These conquered forests, these occupied cities, these subjugated plains, these mountains polluted, were our native soil and we could not regain them. The sacred homeland was under the boot of the German. Was this the death-rattle in the throat of the republic?

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VI

THE GAS

THE severe winter ran its course. We had worked incessantly. We had a whole sector to ourselves. First, there was the tangled network of barbed wire, a piece of work in which we all had a share. Each evening, as night fell, a company of men went out on No Man's Land to work in the thick, treacherous darkness. One gang dug holes and put in the posts, another stretched the parallel wires, another attached the transverse wires. As this required great blows of a mallet, it made considerable noise, which drew down the enemy's gun-fire. As they gained experience, the men went out rapidly, worked swiftly, and returned to our trenches only when their task was accomplished. At dawn, the Boches tried to destroy our work of the night before, by firing many volleys into the network. The damage was never considerable, and they

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stopped that game when, imitating them, we cut their barbed-wire to pieces.

Under that efficacious protection we contrived openings for listening and firing trenches. At the first, two men alternated in a constant lookout, with ear quick to catch any sound, with eyes strained to observe the most minute sign. Behind them, on the benches,* entire sections, with guns poised in the loopholes, waited and watched from twilight to dawn, while the others slept, down in the shelters underground.

This organization constituted the first lines in the spring of 1915, when we hoped for an early victory. So temporary did the work appear to be, we spent no more time and effort on our trench systems than seemed necessary for immediate purposes. The dugouts were of the most limited dimensions, really kennels, large enough for two men to sleep fairly comfortably, but which usually housed six, no one knows how. One came there overcome by sleep. One threw himself on the ground

* The trenches were about seven feet deep. On the forward side was a step, or ledge, on which the men could stand when shooting.—TRANSLATORS' NOTE.

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without removing his accoutrement, and was asleep almost before touching the earth. To afford some protection against the bitter wind, a cloth was stretched in front of the opening. While this shut out the unwelcome breezes, it also shut in a concentrated, hot and malodorous steam, composed of the mouldy moisture from the earth itself, of human perpiration and panting exhalations, of wet leather and clothing. However, one breathed somehow. When the time was up, and one went out to resume work or watching, the icy air enveloped one like a sepuchral winding-sheet, and the night blinded one's eyes. One followed the communication-trench, took up gun or shovel, as the order might happen to be, and became either soldier or laborer; or, more often, both at once. Everything was done at night. Everything was dismal, dangerous, frightful. There was no real repose, no relaxation. The incessant shell-fire added its horror to our other discomforts and dangers. The shell! that insensate creature of chance, which bursts over the innocent, scatters its fragments over the plain, and in stupid indifference crushes a clod of earth or snuffs out the lives of a hundred

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human beings. The shell! that monster which comes with a moaning wail, invisible as a beast of darkness, and dies in a shower of fire.

One easily becomes familiar with its sound. At first, every shot was terrifying. Then we learned to know approximately what course a shell would follow, at what point it would fall. Then we ceased to listen to or fear any but those coming our way. No others counted. They were non-existent.

Before we reached this point of familiarity, the salvos of that plaything, the seventy-five, made us shudder. They came so fast that we scarcely had time to distinguish the individual shots. Immediately the deadly whistling object skimmed the ground, and the explosion resounded. Some men turned pale, others paid little attention.

Berthet and I found much in this life to interest us. We ran about to see whatever could be seen. As soon as a cannonade began, we went in that direction for the pleasure of observing it. We volunteered for all sorts of difficult tasks, tempted by the risk, enticed by the eternal charm of adventure. He was brave, was Berthet, but knew not how brave

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he was. Sometimes I sought to restrain him, at which he was always astonished. "I wish to know," he said, "if I will be afraid." And he had his way. He went out on the embankment, where he inspected the horizon regardless of the projectiles which saluted his silhouette as soon as he appeared.

We had some magnificent spectacles. One evening there was a bombardment followed by infantry attack. The German uneasiness had been evident in the morning. It expressed itself by a storm of projectiles which fell aimlessly and did little damage. The shells cut the grass, exploded like a sheaf of fireworks, sent the dirt flying high into the air. It worried us at first, then, as we found ourselves safe in the shelter of our deep trenches, assurance returned. Each man went about his business. Some were detailed to dig a tunnel, one must go to the kitchens to fetch soup and bread, another cleaned the arms, rusted during the night by the fog, or in the morning by the dew. All the same, this violent bombardment troubled our officers not a little; they feared a surprise. We had a visit from our general toward evening. He gave some orders, took a look at

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the loopholes of observation, and went away apparently content. His calm was most reassuring.

Calm is not everything in war. The plans of the enemy must also be taken into account. The Boche artillery became violent. Over our trenches streamed a fire of shells of all calibers mingled. They fell tearing away whole banks of earth at once; they exploded thunderously, in a cloud of dust and stinking smoke. We looked for the worst; we suspected a close attack, a hand-to-hand clash. Suddenly a great cry rang out:

"The gas!"

It was true. Over there, from the enemy's lines, came great greenish balls, rolling close to the earth, rolling deliberately yet swiftly, rolling straight toward us. Gas! That horrible thing, still almost unknown, which had been used for the first time only recently on the Yser. It was coming with deadly surety amidst a tornado of artillery. Orders were shouted back and forth:

"The gas! Put on the masks!"

Each man spread over his face the protecting cloth. The shelters were closed. The tele-

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phone, whose wires ran the length of the communication-trenches, gave the warning: "Look out! The gas!"

We did not yet know what manner of horror it was. None of us had experienced an attack of the sort. We ran to and fro like ants whose hill has been molested. Some fired their guns at random, others awaited orders. The frightful, livid thing came on, expanded to a cloud, crept upon us, glided into the trenches. The air was quickly obscured. We were swimming in an atmosphere stained a venomous color, uncanny, indescribable. The sky appeared greenish, the earth disappeared. The men staggered about for a moment, took a gasping breath, and rolled on the ground, stifled. There were some knots of soldiers who had been asleep in their beds when overtaken by the gas. They writhed in convulsions, with vitals burning, with froth on the lips, calling for their mothers or cursing the German. We gathered them up as best we could; we took them to the doctors, who, thus confronted by an unknown condition, found themselves powerless. They tried the application of oxygen and ether in an effort to save the lives of the victims, only

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to see them die, already decomposed, in their hands.

The masks had not yet been perfected and were a poor protection. Some ran about like madmen, shrieking in terror, the throat choked with saliva, and fell in heaps, in contortions of agony. Some filled the mouth with handfuls of grass and struggled against asphyxiation. Others, down in the shelters, sprinkled face and neck with brackish water, and awaited a death all too long in coming.* Over all this the artillery shrieked in unchained madness. The sky was of steel, quivering and molten. There were no longer any distinctly heard shots, but a storm of fire. It roared, it whistled, it exploded without respite, as if all the furies of hell were yelping, in a thick, metallic sky. At the left, little by little, an ever-reddening glow showed the neighboring city of Rheims, which the Boches were bombarding in a mad rage of destruction. We saw the

* It has been found that water must not touch the skin for many hours after suffering a gas attack. The chemical action of the water rots the flesh. For the same reason the "poilu" is now clean-shaven: the poison of gas remains in a beard for days, and perspiration adds to the dangers of inhalation.—TRANSLATOR.

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flames leap up, the houses kindle like torches and throw toward the sky clouds of sparks and streams of black and red smoke. Everything seemed flaming and tottering and falling in a wild delirium. The earth itself opened to swallow the last survivors. In the trenches the bodies of the dead were heaped, and twisted or bleeding corpses choked the passageways.

Fiercely, convulsively, desperately, the comrades who were unhurt fought at their loopholes. Reinforcements came from the rear in haste, and took their places. Their eyes were those of madmen, their breath was panting.

"The assault will be here in a minute, boys," I said to my nearest neighbors. "Look out for yourselves. Have your cartridges ready. You, there, lift your gun higher, or you will fire badly! And you, aim toward that corner you see over there!"

Berthet helped me, with a tragic manner of responsibility; the underofficers ran from one man to another crying: "Keep cool! We will get them! Just let them come on!"

Then the action rushed on even more furiously, more demoniac. In the midst of the

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increased cannonade the gun-fire rattled. It commenced at the left, gained the centre, reached the right. The whole line crackled like the beginning of a roll of thunder. We could no longer see ahead of us. We fired as fast as possible, without knowing where, cutting into space.

"Here they are! Keep cool!"

In the dim light a gray mass was oscillating. As it rapidly advanced, we could distinguish small objects on the plain, like moving blades of grass. We fired: cries could be heard. We fired more rapidly. The gas was dissipating, but the night was becoming thick. Our only light was the blazing city of Rheims and the glow of shells. The pandemonium increased. One could distinguish only his immediate neighbor, lifting his gun, firing, recoiling from the discharge, replacing the spent cartridge with a full one. The pungent taste of burnt powder penetrated the throat. We sweat. We no longer feared. We pulled the trigger; we were fighting, we were defending the soil, the trench, the sector, in a blind rage. *They should not take it!* They should give up; they should fall back. We would kill them all rather than

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permit their feet to contaminate the spot we were guarding.

This endured for more than an hour, this insane uproar of shrieking voices, crashing cannon, cracking rifles; while Rheims, in flames threw to the wind her streamers of light.

We had no accurate idea of the battle as a whole. Each man acted for himself, for the little corner of ground in range of his rifle, for the piece of trench which he was holding. At one side, the Boches jumped into the trench, cut the throats of the nearest men, then fell, themselves stabbed by bayonets. At another point they penetrated the barbed-wire entanglements, remained caught there, struggling to free themselves, and were cut to pieces by our fire. Farther on, our shells crushed them. We were scarcely conscious of it. We elbowed our neighbors, we exchanged encouragement, we shrieked when we would speak. We were so intense, so full of fury, that many were frothing when commanded to desist. The under-officers exhausted themselves in crying halt, and had to shake each man to awaken him, to bring him to himself, to make him understand. We felt exasperated.

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However, the cannonade was decreasing in violence. The gun-fire ceased, reviving only at intervals. The stretcher-bearers ran up, took away the wounded, picked up the tortured gas victims, whose lungs creaked like the bellows of a forge. The battle was over. The Boches were repulsed. In spite of their gas, in spite of the surprise, in spite of their cannon, they left on the field before us almost a battalion: sprawling corpses, dismembered like broken puppets; dead men who gaped at the stars; wounded who soon were dead. Our losses were considerable, theirs were much greater. Twenty of their number remained with us as prisoners. Haggard and stunned, they were led to the rear for the interrogatory.

"Well, how has it been?" I asked Berthet, as I gripped his hand. "It was superb!" he responded. There was a hole in his coat. "Not touched?" "No, a ball just missed taking me off." He said it with a calm which I admired. He concealed from me the fact that he had breathed the abominable vapors.

After all, it was only a local action on our

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line. It was not, in the generally accepted sense, a battle. All of us have seen much greater since then. However, on account of the gas, this first engagement is vividly present in our memory, a recollection never to be effaced. It was an encounter so strange! That foul vapor which enveloped the earth, which ate its way into the fibre of the clothing we wore, corroded and withered the leaves on the trees, and changed the aspect of God's sane creation into a distorted image of hell, will remain forever one of the deepest infamies of the Germans. After contact with this poisoned cloud, nothing retained its original appearance. The arms were red without being rusty, the color of uniforms was changed. There were very few of our men suffering from gun or bayonet wounds, but whole mounds of those who died in convulsions: poor, twisted dead, who agonized in dying; so disfigured their own mothers could not have recognized them. Some of them were wringing their hands, others were swallowing stones, others seemed to be rammed into the earth like stakes. This was not war; it was worse. This was not the rain of bullets which pierce the flesh, or break a

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skull in passing. This was not the brutal shell, which bursts to fragments, scatters in a thousand directions and mows down a group of men as gayly as a child knocks down a house of cards. This was another matter. It was the very air turned accomplice of the enemy; blinded eyes, frothing mouth, rotted lungs, a breast on fire; every effort exerted redoubling the torture; the rescuer struck down above the man he attempted to save; the officer suffering like his men; the telephone-operator seized in his shelter, the courier arrested in his course, all alike smothered and struggling with death. This was a breath from the depths of hell, this diabolic invention, which that monster, the German Junker, forced men to choose: weapon of meanness and treachery, which sets at naught the valor of both defender and assailant!

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VII

RHEIMS

WHEN the life fantastic becomes the life ordinary, when one is at the centre of prodigious events which unroll more rapidly than the picture on the screen, and appear in ever-new guise, the astonishing thing becomes a natural thing; the unheard-of becomes the expected. A distortion of sensation is produced; the brain registers only that which surpasses the climax of what has already been experienced; as on mountain heights, peaks which have been surmounted appear low, and the climber feels that only those are high which are still above him.

Thus it became the ordinary thing for Berthet and me, as for our companions, to live in the extraordinary and the supernatural. We felt quite at home in it, and moved at our ease in a situation which, for him at least, would have been untenable a few short months before. We had become soldiers like the others, eating, when we could, a meagre and coarse ration;

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sleeping when it was possible; in constant danger of death, but avoiding it apparently by instinct. We lived with no more care than the beasts of the field; with beards long, hands dirty. We dug in the earth, as did all the rest; we watched at the parapets with eyes puffed from lack of sleep. Uncouthness grew upon us, and we appeared, at dawn, in the glacial cold, muffled up in pieces of cloth and skins of animals; hairy, hideous, and fearsome.

We were on patrol duty one night. Creeping about, we passed the listening-post and advanced on No Man's Land. Like savages, we stalked the enemy for hours, trying to surprise some unknown men: soldiers like ourselves, who might be lost between the lines; men anxious like ourselves, and like ourselves afraid of death and suffering. Then we returned, annoyed to come back without having bagged a foe; regretful that we had not been able to spill some man's blood. However——

"However"—thus we reasoned.

Often, in the evening, when we were free between periods of sentry duty, we would delay our share of heavy sleep wherein one forgot all; when one lay stretched like a beast

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in a stable, on a little straw in the depth of a retreat, poorly protected from the wind and the shells. We would walk the hundred paces of the length of the communication-trench, conversing.

The night enveloped us; the night palpitating with the noise of battle. We could hear the crack of rifles and the roar of cannon. Sometimes the flying steel whirled over our heads with its weird whistle. Some corvées passed, heavily loaded, carrying materials for attack and defense. Habituated as we were to the sight and sound, oblivious to the familiar racket, we walked quite tranquilly, in spirit far removed from our surroundings, expanding our thoughts and confiding our dreams. All sorts of subjects shared our attention: art, history, literature, politics, we touched upon them all, commented upon all as if we had been a hundred leagues away from the war, as if no other occupation had the least claim upon us. The contrast was so vivid, the difference so striking, that sometimes we stopped and exclaimed in amazement at ourselves.

By this time we had no childish vanity in the matter. Our sense of pride was rather

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above it. We called no one's attention to our calm indifference. No! It was night, we were lost in the shadows, no one could see us. We were simply relaxing our brains in withdrawing our thought from the present; in leading it, by means of conversation, toward the past and the future.

One particular desire which we held in common was frequently mentioned: we wished to visit Rheims, which was quite near. Our regiment formed a part of the troops of covertture of the city. However, we could not enter the town without permission, and this could not be obtained without good reason. We finally found an excuse, and the rest was easy.

One morning, armed with our permit, we set out. The expedition was not without danger. For several months, since we had occupied the trenches at the north of the city, we had known that the Boches were obstinately bent upon its destruction. Every day brought its rain of shells. We could see the flames shoot up, we could see writhing columns of smoke mount to the heavens. No matter; the visit tempted us, and the most violent storm of iron and fire would not have deterred us.

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So we went. We prepared our minds, as we thought, for every possible surprise; we were not prepared for what we were destined to find. Approaching by the Faubourg Cires, we entered a ruin. We saw nothing but demolished houses, entire streets swept by machine fire, gnawed by flames, blackened by smoke. Tottering façades, holding their equilibrium by a miracle, supported the skeletons of apartment-buildings, in whose walls blackened shell-holes seemed like dead eyes opened on a void. Heaps of plaster and stone fallen from the walls rendered passage difficult and impeded our progress. Occasionally, an entire section of wall would swing slowly, balance for an instant, then fall in a cloud of dust. It was a house in its death-throes.

After passing this scene of desolation, we entered a quarter still intact, where, to our stupefaction, the city came to life again. There only a few injuries to buildings were visible. Here and there a shell had wounded a structure. The general appearance of everything was quite peaceful. The inhabitants followed the usual routine of life with apparent serenity. Open shops offered their merchandise. Young

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girls came and went smiling. A pastry-cook spread out his tarts and nougats; a stationer displayed his pencils and office supplies; a haberdasher's window was filled with collars and cravats. Nothing indicated war. People went up and down about their business; old women gossiped on their door-step, and peddlers cried their wares.

Around the Place Royale, which was absolutely in ruins, cabmen awaited a fare, stroking the manes of their bony horses, or discussing the price received for the last trip. In the public gardens mothers watched their little ones at play, caressing them or scolding them, as if their entire life were assured, as if no thought of anything unusual entered their brain.

Was it bravery, indifference, habit? Who knows? We were dumbfounded. What! In a city crushed by shells, tortured by fire, subjected to the most barbarous treatment, how was it possible to be so matter-of-fact? Could the life of the populace continue in its usual channels, indifferent to danger, removed from fear, calm as in time of peace?

We must look closer to perceive under the

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surface the explanation of the anomaly; everywhere, people seated or standing observed a patient discipline in using only one side of the street: the one exposed to the direct shock of the shells. Only a city long exposed to bombardment could conceive such a mechanical precaution. It is a protection, because the shell, in falling, bursts; its splinters fly in the opposite direction to that taken by the projectile.

We soon saw the working out of the principle. Attracted by an open shop, we made some purchases at our leisure. A sinister shriek crossed the sky, and a racket followed. "They are bombarding," calmly remarked the young woman who served us. She listened. "It is at the cathedral." Then she continued, most unconcernedly: "Let us see! Some braid? It is at the other counter. You get the buttons here, and the wool and the thread. Is that all you wish? That makes a franc sixty."

Another roar, this time nearer. The street was immediately deserted. So quickly that a stranger could not observe the action, every passer-by disappeared. Every one went underground, somewhere, into an open cellar. It

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happened as naturally and quickly as in ordinary times when people find shelter from a sudden shower. They knew that the hour to seek cover had arrived. The shower of steel would last until evening, and would not cease until a new quarter was obliterated. It was the turn of one *faubourg*, therefore the others would escape this time. Consequently, outside the zone attacked, existence might continue as usual.

Already the rescue squads were running in the direction of the falling shells, as resolute and well disciplined as when at drill. Duty called them. They responded, "Present," without fear or hesitation: down there people were dying under the ruins of their homes. The stretcher-bearers rescued the injured in the midst of the tumult. If they had been praised for their heroism, they would have resented the praise as an insult.

When recovered from our first astonishment, Berthet and I set out. This martyred city, so tragic and so calm, seemed to us superhuman. We found it beautiful. We felt a desire to weep, to cry out, as we looked at its reddened walls, its yawning windows and wrecked roofs.

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We went about gently, as one walks in a place of suffering and sorrow. In our rather aimless wandering, reverent as in a sacred place, we came suddenly in front of the cathedral.

It rose before us like a queen, at the turn of the street. The lofty façade, stained by fire in shades of gold and blood, lifted its proud head to the sky. The towers were like two arms stretched imploringly toward heaven: one reddened by fire, the other clothed by the centuries in the blue veil which shrouds ancient monuments. Between them the shattered rose-window seemed to moan distractedly: a silent sob. That dumb mouth in that fire-reddened face seemed to cry with such hatred, with such anguish, that we stopped, gripped by the sight.

It was there that the great Crime had written its name! There, where France had inscribed the most sacred things of her history; there, by the cradle of the nation, on the book always open, the assassin had left his thumb-print; his infamy remained inscribed in each gaping wound, on each fallen statue. The high towers attested to heaven the execrable violence. The roof was gone, like the scalp which the savage

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tears from the head of his victim. The eyes of God could search to the flagstones and judge with one glance the foul deed.

Outside the church the *Place* was gloomy, but sublime. By an effect of fatality, it had become the dwelling-place of the holy relics driven from the interior. The tabernacle was no longer in the heart of the cathedral, but scattered in fragments around it: the choir encircled the church. Fragments of stained-glass replaced the organ-pipes, and the wind moaned through the leaden groins, and chanted the dirge of the sacred spot.

Cathedral! Church thrice holy! The murderer tried to destroy thee: he has given thee eternal life. He tried to gag and choke thee: but the voice from thy tortured throat resounds higher and clearer throughout the world. In his stupidity he believed he could annihilate thee: instead, he has glorified thee. Cathedral! A song in stone, a hymn—hymn too ethereal for the human ear to catch; a poem of beauty and light, which the sodden Boche thought to efface, but which stands resplendent, a witness of his shame, before humanity and eternal righteousness. Divine, immortal cathe-

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dral! Men have never created a human prayer more sublime than art thou, bombarded. The German shell believed it had power to destroy thee. It has crushed thine arches and broken thy wings. Thou hadst no need of wings to soar. As a spirit of light thou hast floated above the city; now thou rulest over the city the war, and France; as a symbol, thou art resplendent over all the world. Rheims, thou wert the shrine of France; broken, thou art become her emblem. Thou art no longer ours alone. Thy majesty rises unshaken, triumphant, a divine intelligence facing savage cruelty; a barrier touched, but not destroyed, defying bestiality.

We had no words to express our emotions. We walked about, in silent exaltation. From its purple shroud, still smoking, the enormous basilique spoke to us. Great scenes in history were enacted in its sacred precincts: all the sacred kings, the noble sons of France; Clovis baptized by St. Remy; Charles VII led by Jeanne d'Arc, whose bronze image still defies the enemy from the porch of the church; Charles X, last king anointed in this august place—all, all were there as restless phantoms;

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powerful, saintly, silent, looking on. We were satiated with emotion, bewildered by a hundred beauties: the light through the broken arches, the fragments of art treasures in the dust at our feet, the scintillating glass on the flagstones. We went away, fairly giddy with its impassioned grandeur.

The increased cannonade directed our course. It was impossible to remain longer. We crossed the forsaken park and made a détour around the deserted station. Behind us lay a city of silence, but her martyrdom continued incessantly. Shrill whirrings made the air quiver. Shells growled above the roofs, leaped the streets, crossed the squares, threatened, fell and exploded. There was a sudden crash of collapsing floors and of tumbling masonry. A quarter, somewhere in the city, was being pounded to dust and débris; an entire quarter was being hammered out of existence. Clouds of plaster filled the air; great stones crumbled.

Families were unable to escape. Their homes, which should have sheltered them, were thrown wide open to the brutal dangers of the street. The invalid's bed tottered in the ruins, the baby was thrown from its cradle. The old

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man died at the side of the youth, the wife in the arms of her husband, the child at its mother's breast. The criminal extermination, determined upon and planned, was completing its frightful work, was blotting out a city, was beating to death a country. The Boche, squatting on the commanding heights, aimed his guns with ease, made sure of his fire and picked out his prey. He struck practically without risk to himself, sure to hit a target in the chaos of roofs, to demolish and to destroy. A town —what an immense quarry! The shell may fall where it will: it is sure to kill. The explosion will burst in some window, will cross some bedchamber, will find some victim. A town is a quarry more easily sighted than a battery. It is huge, it is immovable, it cannot reply. One can destroy it without danger to oneself.

Therefore the shells fell unerringly; only the flames and smoke made reply. . . .

We paid it no further attention.

My poor Berthet, charming companion, and sharer of so many unforgettable experiences, was unable to follow the regiment through

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all its struggles. One day, while in the Rheims sector, he suffered severely in a gas attack and the physicians ordered him to the rear for treatment in one of the resting-camps. Gradually the soft air of France healed his tortured lungs and started him on the path of recovery. The German poison had, however, severely shaken his constitution and the cure was slow. He was unable to rejoin us for the tragic trials at Verdun.

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VIII

DISTRACTIONS

EXISTENCE in the trenches is characterized by a monotony that soon becomes a burden. It is made up of waiting and work: work in which a man is by turns dirt-digger, sentinel, carpenter, and porter. There is much time for rest and repose. It is a special type of life, which recalls that of the sieges of olden days, when armies sat long months at a time facing each other. One does not fight all the time. The vigil is constant, but the struggle is not. There is the incessant watching of the field in front, the unrelaxed tension of stalking the enemy; and at the rear the staleness of inaction.

What is there to do? Sleep, certainly. Then find amusement, for the time is long. The hours move slowly, night follows day and day night without bringing change. Therefore, one must exercise his ingenuity.

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One writes a lot of letters. There is always a relative to enlighten, or a sweetheart to console, or a mother to entertain. Letters arrive which are read and reread. Then the newspapers bring their limited ration of news. We discuss their contents. We learn that the submarine warfare is extending; that the Zeppelins have gone over England; that the Bulgars are attacking the Roumanians; that a great parliamentary speech has explained to the world the causes of the upheaval. Thus we kill a few more minutes. Then ennui returns: dull tediousness that puts the thumbscrews on the brain; homesickness for the distant fireside, for the old life renounced for war; yearning for the past, still near and yet so far. One wanders about and knows not what to do. One fellow has some playing-cards and opens a game. We smoke, and dream, and sew, and clean our arms. We await our turn at sentry duty. It rains. We yawn. The sun comes out, one risks his life to pay a visit to his neighbors. The picturesque ceases to be, by reason of familiarity. One sees nothing of that which at first fixed his attention. The deep trench where crazy grasses hang is a road

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only too well trodden. The mess is stale, the card-game stupid. One is bored to death and utterly worthless.

Then the inveterate wag intervenes. He sings, he "joshes." He brings a laugh. The dying conversation revives. Those who were dozing sit up again and take notice. Circles form. Each one tells a story, and the long faces spread into smiles. Torpor is banished for a moment. The man who was cutting a cane with his pocket-knife exhibits it. It is fine and much admired. The man who hollowed out an inkstand from a fuse brings it forth. His work is curious, dainty, and ornamental: bravo! A painter is there, an artist, who brings out his album; he has a hundred drawings, warm with color. Each man would like to possess a copy. That is the end: there is nothing more. All this is too brief, and the time is too long. We cast about for something new.

In a hut some one installs a museum. It is a collection of souvenirs of the field of battle. The gathered trophies hang on the walls. A Boche helmet is near a freakishly twisted splinter. A German trooper's sword-belt hangs

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near a saw-bayonet. There are cartridge-boxes, fragments of guns, the button of a tassel from the sabre of a buried German officer. Every one is interested in the work and brings his contribution to enrich the collection. It does not belong to any one in particular, but is owned jointly. It is the pride of the sector and the joy of the regiment. It receives the *casse-tête* picked up after the last hand-to-hand scrimmage with the Boches; a reservoir of liquid fire, whose bearer lies somewhere near the trench that he sought to enter; some fragments of grenades—anything which one might pick up on a kilometre of ground furrowed by projectiles, dug up by shells, or ploughed by cannon-balls. Curious conglomeration! Glorious scraps of iron! Mute witnesses of the fury of men, implements of their ferocity!

At another spot some man who loves the cultivation of the land cares for a wee patch of garden. A garden, yes, that is what I said. In the midst of the trenches. He has planted some pansies, a sprig of stock, and three clumps of pinks. He waters them every morning, and watches them carefully. Woe to any careless foot that might crush them! These flowers,

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in the sombre surroundings, breathe perfume and poetry.

At another spot a fight between a dog and a rat is pulled off. A lieutenant sets a fox-terrier on a promising hole of the rodents. A group of men look on eagerly. One, armed with a pick, enlarges the opening. Another removes a stone which was in the way. The dog, trembling with excitement, sniffs, paws, digs, buries his nose in the earth, scratches, reaches the animal at the bottom of his retreat—seizes him! Good dog! He shakes the rat furiously, breaking his back. The victor is applauded and petted.

Simple distractions, these! I will pass them by quickly. There is the man who makes chains of welded wire; the one whose hobby is photography. One mysterious fellow amuses himself with cookery. There are some secret pursuits, like that of the inveterate hunters, who place game-traps at twilight and at dawn endanger their lives to go out to empty them. There are fishermen who drop lines in the canal. A hundred avocations are followed on the edge of the war, side by side with the service, in range of the cannon and punctuated by shells.

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I had my occupation, as well as the others, you may be sure. I published a newspaper: a great affair. A newspaper, in the trenches—that savors at once of a trade and of an adventure. Title: *The War Cry*, appearing once a month. Every month, then, I had a problem: to get paper. An obliging cyclist had to bring it from the village on the day fixed. He left it at the foot of a sapling, no matter what the uproar overhead; no matter how large the edition of shrapnel messages from the Germans. Oh, honest pulp, intended for a simple life, into what scenes of adventure art thou thrust!

In one trench the print-shop was twenty feet underground. It was illuminated by three night-lamps, set in a triangle. At another place the shop was on a level with the surface of the ground, and the bombardment scattered sand and pebbles over the proof. At another time it was installed in a bedroom of a ruined house. As there was no roof to catch the rain, it fell in large tears on the printer and the printing. No matter! The number was issued, illustrated. It was eagerly sought, and the copies circulated briskly, carrying gratuitous joy, smoothing knit brows, bringing a laugh,

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and, finally, carrying to the rear the gayety of the front.

When I look back upon these labors, they seem to me childish. In their place, they were amazing. The Great Tragedy held us constantly in its clutch. The man who was polishing a ring for his fiancée did not finish it: that very evening a ball or a piece of shell shattered the work and destroyed the worker. The man who was carving a walking-stick was a mutilated wreck before his work was finished. The danger was incessant. In these occupations we sought distraction from the thought of it all, but one could never ward off that which fate held in store for him. It was an intermission snatched from ennui; a truce; and when one was doing fairly well, thinking no more of physical discomfort and mental anguish, suddenly the cannon barked, the alarm was sounded, and the dance of hell was on again!

"Outside: trench thirteen!"

Then we ran. We left the rings and walking-sticks and the newspaper. *The War Cry*— It was the real war cry now. The Boche had come upon us by stealth. It might be night or day, morning or evening. He slid,

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he crept, he crouched, he jumped into our trench. We must hack him to pieces with grenades. Then we must put up again a fallen splinter-shield, reconstruct an observation-post, open again a filled-up trench. The shells came like gusts of wind, the shrapnel flew, smoked, and stunk.

Or, at another time, it was our turn to leap out, run to the assault, take a trench, hold it, and guard it.

It was necessary, from time to time, to go to the rear that we might enjoy some real security and relaxation.

The relief! Who will ever adequately sing its praise? It came at night, ordinarily. Two or three days before the event the sector saw strangers arrive for a visit, officers and sergeants, who looked around and took instructions. This is the way they were shown about:

"Look out at this point. This part of the trench seems to be in easy range of the guns."

"This is a bad corner. Torpedoes hit it every morning. Go by quickly over there, for you can be seen."

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"Every man who passes this spot is saluted by a bullet. We have some wounded every evening."

They took notes, made observations and inquiries. We looked upon their activities with satisfaction. They were the forerunners of comrades who were about to come, in their turn, to enjoy a period in the open country—underground. They never came too soon. Already we were making up our packets, putting our affairs in order, buckling our knapsacks, filling our side-bags.

We departed fewer than we came. We left some chums in the earth, under humble mounds marked with a cross. There was one man surprised when on patrol—he was carried back dying in the arms of his companions. Another, disembowelled by a grenade, fell at his post without a cry. We had known these men, we had loved them. One was gay, one was grave. All were loyal comrades whom we would never see again. When killed they had remained all day lying at their posts. A cloth was thrown over them, concealing the face and partly covering the body. In the evening when the shadows fell, we put them in their graves.

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It was very simple. If possible, the section surrounded the grave, a rough excavation hollowed in the dirt thrown up from the trenches. Sometimes, not always, some one murmured a prayer. The body was lowered, and the dead went his way saluted as a hero by the cannon. That was all. It was sad and impressive, simple as an unpremeditated gesture. Some one put a bunch of field-flowers on the fresh mound. The soldier's cap was placed on the wooden cross. Then into a bottle was slipped the name of the departed—dead that France might live, fallen at his post of honor. Immediately we returned to our places, to watch and to fight. To-day it was he. To-morrow it would be one's self.

The relief came by following the communication-trenches. Curious concerning their new post, the fresh arrivals asked many questions:

"Pretty nifty here, isn't it?"

"Where are the kitchens?"

We informed them as rapidly as possible. We wished that they would arrive more quickly. It seemed as if we would perish in waiting for them, and that the danger increased by their coming. They made a lot of noise. They went

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back and forth, they talked. Surely the Boche would hear them and let loose his cannon.

In fact, that is what often occurred. Then the brutal shells added to the disorder. Ignorant of the shelters, lost in the thick darkness, the new arrivals flattened themselves out where they could. Their non-commissioned officers reassembled them and led them on in jostled disorder. It seemed that the confusion would never end, that we would have to stay there, all mixed together like tangled thread from an unwound spool. It seemed that the deadly hammering would annihilate us all, down in the earth. Then the officers brought order from chaos. The first line took their places. At the posts of listening the new men replaced the old.

"Notice that recess: that is where the Boches send their love-tokens."

"Do you see that black pile over yonder? Behind it is a German machine-gun."

Down in the shelters the new men were making themselves at home, the departing men were gathering up their belongings.

"Good luck to you!"

"Don't worry about that!"

Then we set out. We reached the line of

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supply, and crossed a clearing filled with artillery. We could breathe more easily. We were going away, toward repose. At last, in the darkness, we found the road. Conversation began, pipes were lighted. We were getting farther away from the tunnels, from the depths of the earth, and from death. Though still menaced by shells, we felt liberated. We came to a demolished village occupied by moving shadows: men who remained at the rear, in the accessory service of food supply and munitions. Lanterns bobbed here and there. Some horses hitched by the road switched their tails in friendly salute. We went on. We met an ammunition-train going at full speed in a terrible racket of wheels and oaths. Still we marched. We descended a slope. Over yonder lay the Promised Land, spared by the gods of war: where the crops were growing; where the houses had roofs, the villages had inhabitants, the barns had straw; where there was wine to drink, girls to look at, and merchandise to buy. It was all there. We knew it. The recollections of our former visit came to mind. One hoped to find the cantonment running on as in the last sojourn; la mère Laprot, who

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knew so well how to cook an omelet, and big Berthe, whose teeth were so white when she smiled.

One gave an energetic hunch to the knapsack. One recognized every tree, every turn of the road. We were getting nearer. One more pause and we would be there. We must still climb a bluff, steep as a ladder, leading to the plateau. We climbed—for everything can be overcome.

At last we arrived. The village awaited us with open arms. We entered, and were at home.

The shed was hospitable as ever. We felt of the straw, and laid aside our accoutrement. The arms and leather trappings made a little pile at the head of each man's place. Blankets came out of the knapsacks. How delicious to stretch at full length on the straw! A few moments more and a hundred sonorous snores, deep and diversified, blended their antiphones under the worm-eaten roof.

Life entered the village with the troops. From early morning the streets swarmed. Wagons lined up under the trees and unpacked their loads. Horses chewed their hay while

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switching their tails contentedly, or enjoyed long drinks at the trough. The blacksmith hammered the glowing horseshoes in the midst of a smoky haze. The buffets were full. The cold-meat shop was invaded. The grocer was besieged until he emptied his boxes. It was a rush, a battle, an assault.

"Some sausage!"

"Some thread!"

"Some soap!"

"How much for this cheese?"

"I'll take that box!"

The coins jingled. Happy laughter responded to happy smiles. Wine flowed. At the river laundry the surface of the stream was billowy white with the suds from well-washed clothing. With a drum for a chair, the barber was busy with his razor. At another place shower-baths completed the work of renovation. New faces emerged, fresh-skinned and wide-eyed. The exuberant joy of youth burst forth into gay cries and bodily freedom. Visits were exchanged. The smoking kitchens were sending out delicious odors. The non-coms were kept busy hunting for their men who had disappeared, flown away.

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By noon, however, the troop was again in order. In the square the soldiers were in line, with arms polished and garments clean. The roll was called. Their appearance was noted, their losses of equipment were made good. The report was read. We learned that such an one was cited for bravery, that the general was pleased, that we would remain eight days without molestation.

Then the gayety increased. We organized to make the most of our vacation. Some men with a bright idea arranged a theatre and prepared a concert. Two sawhorses supported the stage, which we trimmed with leaves. We draped the flag of the *mairie* overhead. The programme was quickly arranged, as we had a considerable talent in the regiment.

On the day appointed for the performance chairs were placed for the higher officers, the chief of the battalion, and the captains. The privates noisily disposed of themselves as chance permitted. There were spectators roosting on the wheels of carts, others perched on straw-stacks; wherever a body could hold its equilibrium, there was a body. An improvised orchestra opened the entertainment. Then

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several singers followed with comic songs. The applause was tumultuous, as high spirits mounted higher. We forgot the war, at that moment, and its suffering and privation. A ballad touched our deeper sentiment. A monologue was punctuated with laughter. The hilarious faces of the spectators told of their pleasure—the joy of living, with youth and health. We relaxed our tense nerves, and became human beings again. There were no more shells, no more mud, no more guard duty, no more fatigue. The tragedy had paused; and, if one had not heard the growling rage of the cannon bent upon its work of death and destruction, one would have believed that there could be no more pleasant existence.

On other days there were games in the open air. Like children freed from school the men ran in the meadows, tussled in a game of prisoner's base, or played leap-frog. The suppleness of body, the litheness of movement, were such as to inspire admiration. These were no longer soldiers, but graceful athletes, with agile muscles and solid torso. Under the trees gently waving in the breeze, with the clear sky of France above a charming country-

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side, the scene evoked the picture of the athletic games of antiquity. Not even the group of philosophers was lacking, walking up and down and arguing.

Thus the hours ran on, peaceful and all too short. The troop took a fresh breath, renewed its spirit, calmed excited nerves, found new courage and a magnificent enthusiasm. The cruel remembrance of dark hours, of horrible spectacles, of losses, became dim. We found again a vibrant love of life. The soul-sickness which had grown upon us at the parapets, under the shells, melted away in the new environment, in the joy of a recreation dearly won.

The week of vacation was completed. They were new men, refreshed and invigorated, who fell into line when the hour arrived. In the darkness we retraced the road by which we had come. We were returning to the battle, we were re-entering the tunnels, the dugouts, the redans, the trenches, the parallels. Now we were the relief, in our turn. We took our place. We brought back with us arms, food, replenished cartridge-boxes, new men to fill the vacancies in our ranks. More than that,

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we brought back valor, patience, faith, and a spirit reborn.

We entered again the domain of death, again we began the agony.

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IX

THE BATTLE OF CHAMPAGNE

A YEAR had passed. The Marne and the Yser had gone into history. We knew that enormous preparations were in progress behind our lines. They are always known. The symptoms are perfectly visible. The artillery is massed, the various operations are pushed more vigorously, new precautions are taken.

Vague rumors are afloat. Every one wishes to appear informed, and the strangest forecasts, the most absurd reports are passed from mouth to mouth, originating no one knows where.

"We are going clear to the Rhine, this time!"

"What! do you think? As far as the Meuse, and already——"

"The cavalry is massed at the rear; and if the cavalry passes, the line is already smashed. Then, *mon vieux*, how far do you think we'll go?"

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The war was changing its aspect. Germany, checked at the Marne, seemed to have an unsuspected force. Her regiments were renewed continuously. They seemed to spring from the ground, an uncounted host, capable of breaking over any barrier. Unprepared France, in accepting the combat, profited by the period of "digging in," to cast big guns and manufacture shells. A colossal effort galvanized her hope. People repeated the famous words of Joffre: "Je les grignote." *

We were confident: Germany could not win. She would be beaten as soon as we could collect guns and ammunition in sufficient quantities. Some words of the generals came down to the ranks. Gallieni had said: "They are in the trenches—they are lost!"

We believed it, we were sure of it. The humblest cook, in his smoky *abri*, spattered with his sauces, his blackened face beaming with smiles, had no more doubt of it than the major-general in his automobile.

Many furloughs had been granted. Each man had been allowed to visit his family, and had spread assurance of success in return for

* Literally, "I am gnawing them away."

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the festivities his friends had prepared for him. No doubts found lodgment in the minds of the people. On tenter-hooks the country awaited victory. Trembling old mothers believed it, tearful wives put faith in it, fathers felt convinced of it. At last we would be avenged, we would punish the enemy's infamous arrogance, we would chastise him, we would crush him. We were going to crunch him by an enormous pressure, overthrow his system of trenches, advance, break his line; and then, with one burst of valor, we would hurl him back whence he came—into his deep forests, as far as the Rhine; perhaps still farther, to his lair. Every one knew the good news, counted on it, awaited it with impatience.

People liked the bearing of the soldiers. All were delighted to see them so robust, so hardened; more alert than at the beginning, more viril, more manly. The warrior's helmet graced his forehead like an aureole. The men were fêted and showered with tokens of affection. Long trains brought them home—so ardent, and young, and splendid; shouting their joy in the stations, passing through towns with the air of a victor. How the women admired

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them! They were treated (in advance) as liberators. Those sober people who still were apprehensive of the outcome, who reckoned up the future and calculated the chances, were looked upon with a reproachful eye. This time it was certain: we would pass!

The opening came the 20th of September. A furious storm of artillery saluted the dawn, and set the thunder rolling. It was a prodigious simoon. The sky cracked with the terrible, hot breath; the earth itself bubbled. A deluge of red-hot iron fell. It was more than a noise: it was a tempest, a gigantic roaring, the forge of Vulcan in full action; an entire sector of the front bursting into flame. What a fantastic tornado! All calibers of shells shrieked together. No single voice of cannon could be distinguished in the concert. They were blended in one roll, as if a god had sounded the charge on a gigantic drum. The avalanche of steel fell on the enemy's breastworks, spattered over the intervening space, let loose billows of smoke, dust, and flames. The very earth seemed to cry out to heaven, as it was pounded to powder and scorched by the fire. Entire sections of trench walls leaped into the air; a giant plough

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turned over the tunnels. A heavy cloud formed, grew thicker, rolled over the battle-field. The passing hours augmented the uproar. No sooner did the climax appear to be reached than the tumult increased afresh.

Massed near the field of carnage, the bivouacked troops were in readiness. Each company had its rôle, and each was ready. Each knew at what hour to join the dance. They were going to pierce through, they would pass! Comrades exchanged encouragement and last promises. All hoped to survive, and pursue the routed foe in a sweeping victory.

Our regiment, like others, awaited the call. It had no active part in the festivity, but was present. This was for us a poignant grief. In our sector, not a sound. The cannon were as silent as if every living thing had become a mere spectator of the drama. As the roaring increased in volume from minute to minute, we listened. We divined the scene. We could follow it in the clouds, and in the sounds carried by the breeze. We were like curious, listening neighbors who hear the people next door quarrel and fight. The Germans opposite us remained silent also, and listened, like ourselves.

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Battle of Champagne! It had not yet a name. It held all the hope of France, a single, united, colossal WILL. For five days France could only listen to the panting of an army in travail, and held her breath.

The 25th of September, at 9.15 in the morning, the first line left the trenches; bounded forward, hurled themselves on the enemy. Another line followed, and another, and another. Less than an hour later, everywhere, even well back at the rear, messages of victory came. The telephone passed on the joyful news, distributed it to the end of its lines. In our ranks, where we awaited our turn with arms at rest, we breathed with high-swelling hope. We defied the enemy, that day. We looked at his lines, marked his location. To-morrow, perhaps, we would be where he was to-day. We would command his crushed-in shelter, his hiding-places opened by the shells; we would be the victors, and he would be driven before us. Oh, yes, we were quite sure. Already, with pricked-up ears, we could perceive the advance. Our cannon pierced his lines. It roared elsewhere than was usual; already, opposite us, the German had turned.

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And yet—no! The accursed race has the tricks of a cowardly beast. To the chivalrous courage which offers itself for an open test of prowess, the Boche opposes stealthy ambush, burrowing in the ground. For the noble *élan* of our men, for their impetuous passion, for their valor, the Teutonic sneak sets a snare: close to the ground, about a foot high or less, a fine copper-wire was concealed in the grass, and electrified. Our heroes were ensnared in that web. In vain their assaults were renewed. In vain they accomplished a hundred exploits. Close to the earth the traitorous wire caught their ankles, sent the electric shock through their legs, threw them down and burned them.

But we—we were still ignorant of all this, and we awaited our turn. In the falling night we saw the neighboring sky light up. The enemy's fear was read in the number of his rockets. He was afraid of our sortie, of our onslaught and the outcome.

Ah! Those hours! Those days, those four days of superhuman effort! In what a fever we passed them! At any moment we could become participants, and yet we remained there, inert, champing our bits. We talked,

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that we might shake off our impatience; that we might hear words, though their import went unnoticed. We talked without knowing what we said, merely to hear ourselves say something. We waited for our cue: nothing came! Near us our comrades were fighting in a veritable furnace; they were living the apotheosis of supreme minutes, living the glory of combat, amidst an uproar of shells: in suffering of the flesh and in the beauty of sublime Adventure. We envied them. We mounted to the extreme edge of the embankments, to the parapets of the trenches, that we might see farther and follow more closely the movement of the drama; that we might breathe the odor of battle and grasp its splendor. We looked at the fire-reddened sky, where a hundred lightnings flashed and a hundred thunders rolled. We desired, with all our souls, to enter the strife, and at last force back the intrenched enemy—intrenched in our land, in our soil.

Since then many a battle has been fought. We have had Verdun, we have had the Somme, we have had the Aisne, we have had almost each day a unique page of history. Most certainly; but it was at this time that we learned

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our lesson. We learned that patience is the weapon *par excellence* in a war such as this; whereas, at that time we still conserved intact the old faith in French ardor. It was the first shock following the Marne, after the defense of the Yser. It was the first hope of breaking through. We were near it, so near we could almost touch it, but we did not attain it. We were ready for death itself, but the sacrifice was unavailing. The sacks loaded for the forward march, the filled cartridge-cases, weighed heavily and more heavily when we knew that the line remained where it had been, that the breach was not sufficient, that an insignificant wire had stopped our onslaught and protected the German.

Nevertheless, the results were worth the effort. We counted our prisoners by hundreds, we gathered from them much information. Yes; but the gain was as nothing, so great had been our hopes. We were bound to accept another hibernation, dig in the earth again, dig oftener and longer; look forward to a war of greater duration, more murderous; recommence the effort, accept not months, but years.

The war ceased to be a human struggle. The

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mass of material became appalling. It was no longer a shock of arms, but an industrial clash: the machine substituted for the valor of a man, the contrivance become demoniac. Cannon were made in enormous calibers. Old pieces were replaced by huge-throated monsters, and one guessed that the wily German, girt for supreme effort, was preparing something more, which would make the early part of the war seem like child's play.

This is why the present war is impossible of narration. It is no longer a battle of a certain date. It is not, as in former times, a moment in history, the clash of two wills, the shock of two armed bodies of men. It is a period in a century. It involves, not two peoples, but the world. It is not a turning-point, but a transformation. It is almost a state of society: "C'est la guerre."

Later, in an unforeseen epoch, in the year ——, it will be taught the children as two dates: the war began August 2, 1914; it ended ——. All the tragedy, all our cries, our furies, our agonies, our suffering and death—all this, without name, blurred and indistinct, will be contained between two numbers, and will

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mark two eons: that before the War, that after the War. We will have fought and we will have wept; our bodies will have been broken and our hearts will have bled, without our being able to say, "It happened as I have told it," for we will not know just how it happened. We will be obliged to call to mind the first day when grenades were used; the day torpedoes came to light; the advent of the four-hundreds. Facts will be mixed in our troubled memories. We will no longer recall all that happened to us. To be more explicit, to create a truer picture, we will say:

"At the Marne, we used rifles."

"In Champagne, we threw bombs."

"At Verdun—such cannon!"

"On the Somme the shells flew so thick they met in mid-air."

"And then—and then, America came!"

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X

VERDUN

THOSE who have not been actively engaged in the war cannot form any conception of it. When they hear a combatant speak of it, they say:

"Then you fight all the time?" "No." Whereupon they think: "Then in the firing-line one is not really in much danger."

Ah, not so fast, good people! In this war, this new, present-day war, the vigilance is continuous, the hand-to-hand struggle is not. Shells fall unceasingly, but the open battle, the assault, is not without interruption. Fortunately.

Thus it was that after the German check, after the Crown of Nancy had withstood the foe's attack, since the Marne in fact, the sector at Verdun remained quiet.

It was a particularly good point. Here and there a sprinkle of shells, then nothing more.

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There was fighting everywhere else, in Flanders, in Artois, in Champagne, even in the Woëvre district, but not at Verdun. The sector was so calm, that the only guard left there consisted of Territorials, mostly older men. They worked without too much effort, these fathers of families; without much disturbance, doing general work of repairs about the fortifications, pipe in mouth, almost at peace in the midst of war. In the winter of 1915 they shivered a little with the cold; but the forest was near by, wood was abundant, and the cold caused no great suffering. In the evening, down in the deep trenches, in the well-heated huts, or in the powerful forts, such as Douaumont, Vaux, Vachereauville, they basked in the heat as on a sunny day. They looked at the falling snow and the landscape sleeping under its white blanket. They swept the snow with branches of trees, blew on their fingers a little, accepted their slight discomfort in patience.

December passed, unusually cold; then January came, bringing the new year. 'One more year gone, one less to come! Soon the beautiful days would come, the spring, and—who knows?—perhaps peace. Germany was

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tired of it all, near the end of her resources, and would give in. Every one had his own definite idea on the subject. According to one, peace would come before the end of June. Another thought the war would last well toward the end of July. No one imagined that the following winter——

February entered. At the listening-posts one received a surprise: one noticed signs of life and activity among the enemy.

"They are unloading iron."

"They are doing a lot of talking."

Bah! The Boches were putting their affairs in order. For more than a year the opposing lines had been looking at each other without any great exchange of blows. They felt quite well acquainted. The fellows opposite were taking good care of their own bones. Some said they were only the Landsturm, who were hibernating over there.

In the town of Verdun the usual life continued. The cafés were so crowded they turned people away; concerts and theatres were in full swing; everywhere there was great animation, on account of the presence of troops in increased numbers. One could not find a vacant

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room to rent, and the price of provisions soared. All the towns and even villages, where so many troops were spending their money, were infected with this fever of success, of easy money, of the riches which rolled in. Verdun was no exception to the rule. The citadel was choked with troops: officers and privates, drinking and laughing. To be sure, when the war goes well, there is no need to be austere.

February reserved its own surprise. The short month, which amounts to nothing at all, so short that it seems crippled, this one-armed month, displayed in this particular year the malice of a dwarf.

Suddenly the German line burst into flame. It was like a spark on a train of powder. Twelve hundred cannon, perhaps more, crashed in chorus.

"*Alerte!* To arms!"

Ah! Yes! Ground, hacked, mutilated, overrun, those easy-going papas, the Territorials, fought the best they could; but the Argonne was the accomplice of the Boche. The drive became irresistible. With the shell-power of this massed artillery, the lines were broken and obliterated. Under the storm of

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shells the trenches were levelled. It was not an artillery battle, nor merely a violent attack. It was rather an avalanche of explosives. The molten torrent, crackling with sparks, fantastic, inhuman, swept all before it. All the massed Krupp guns in diabolic fury spat their clots of flaming blood. The torn, disembowelled earth leaped into the air and fell in dust. A bitter smoke filled the air, dense on the plain and dense on the mountain summit. Douaumont became a forge, Vaux was a fiery cyclone. Thavannes was a scarlet glow, le Mort Homme was a continuous roar, and Verdun heard the approaching thunder in apprehensive dread.

At the call for reinforcements the regiments came in all haste, to bare their breasts to the cannon. Fiercely the units clung to their ground, placed their batteries, intrenched themselves, and offered stubborn resistance. The enemy still advanced. The adversary was not an army division but all Germany, with the dynasty, the Crown Prince, the old Haseleer at their head. The defenders were again faced by the terrible order, "Conquer or die," as on the Marne and the Yser. Once more

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that game was played. Once more it had the upper hand. Destiny, impassive, looked on.

Three kilometres of retreat brought the French to the Côte de Poivre.

The Boche had orders to take, at all costs, the "strongest citadel of France." That success would mean the death of our country. It meant all France exposed to the foe, Paris captured, Defeat. It meant Crime triumphant, history violated, supremacy of brutal might, humanity's bonds reforged. It meant the flower of the Revolution crushed and Liberty in chains. It meant the Kaiser's boot on the neck of the world.

"Do you wish aid?" came the message from England, already preparing to send succor. France responded proudly: "No! I can hold my ground."

And she held it. The world knows it.

An innumerable host, coated in dirty gray like a repulsive animal, rushed on in its heavy, obstinate bravery; as an infuriated bull with lowered head madly charges his foe, so the German brute in his blind rage hurled himself toward us. In the path of the Hunnish Horde

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stood French valor. THEY SHALL NOT PASS! Nor did they. But—what a struggle!

All the slopes which form the heights of the Meuse and are the ramparts of Gaul, resounded as a monster forge. There Vulcan had set up his furnaces. Such a battle is too great to be recounted. It is the story of Thavannes, whose immense tunnel of approach sheltered a whole battalion at a time. It is the story of the fall of Douaumont; then the siege of indomitable Vaux, dauntless, resisting, panting, quivering like a drum. There the shells fall at the rate of ten per minute. Raynal is commanding there: that is enough. Ten times the German hurled his force against the fortifications, and ten times he fell back, baffled. The garrison stood its ground in a furnace of the damned. New men entered by a breach, followed a narrow path, found the postern gate, and leaped in. For every man who came, came a shell. Overhead twenty airplanes circled about, directing the fire, like vultures above the eagle's nest; while the cannon on the surrounding heights converged their fire.

Vaux! Heroic name, name never to be forgotten! Vaux, a rock burned by acids, by

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powder, by the fires of hell. Vaux held out five days, six days—eight days! The sky at night was a hot glow. The earth was one continuous roar of explosions, enveloped in billows of smoke. In that inferno men fought unto death. Trenches, shelters, stone, and earthworks were wiped away by the shells; the battle left the protection of the ground and swung into free space.

The regiments were brought from the rear. They were supplied with food and ammunition by a whole army of camions, which looked like an immense serpent twisting along the road. Beyond Verdun the men entered directly into the furnace. Their units melted in the very act of going to the relief of their comrades at the firing-line. No matter! They advanced, leaping from one shell-hole to another, up to the lines where the survivors of the preceding regiments still held the assailant at a distance. They were one man against ten. Of a hundred who set out, only fifty arrived. They felt the reassurance given by the strength of Vaux. Vaux hammered by blows—but Vaux still living, still French, withstanding the tempest and defying the German. One felt there the heart of steel in the fortress of

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rock. In addition to the battle all about was the spectacle of a mass of masonry holding an army in check.

Vaux fell. Only thirst ended its resistance. The enemy, stupefied to count the handful of heroes who had thus held them at bay, rendered the captives the highest honors. The Commandant Raynal kept his sword; the Crown Prince, in humility before such glory, was glad to pay him homage, and asked to be presented.

Vaux fell, but Verdun was not taken. There huge shells fell unceasingly. The German loves the easy targets: a cluster of houses, a town, is an object hard to miss. In the town, then, the storm swept the streets. Entire quarters went down in dust. Like Rheims, like Soissons, like Ypres, like Liége, Verdun was the victim of the Huns. People took refuge in the citadel, in its enormous subterranean chambers of massive masonry. There, where the stone corridors were damp as cellars, night and day both soldiers and civilians found shelter. There young mothers nursed their babes, there people of all conditions lived as best they could; there, underground, helter-skelter, all piled together. They could hear the shells of the

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Hun falling on the city, the houses crumbling, the wounded shrieking.

All France and all the world had their eyes on Verdun the inviolable; on Verdun surrounded by flames, in the vortex of action; on Verdun, which did not weaken. Without respite, the Teutonic masses were hurled to the assault. Like a sea of mud they poured upon the outposts of the city. They were beaten down by grenades, shells, machine-guns, fire, shot, and powder; and They did not pass!

All about were scenes most thrilling. It would be impossible to recount them all. We must choose only one or two.

One day, then, of date unrecorded (Verdun held out eight months!), a troop going up to the fortress of Thavannes found the railway below and followed it. They came to the tunnel and entered, although it was already much encumbered. In vain did the gendarme on guard try to oppose their passage: the new-comers were too many. They numbered about six hundred. Above them the battle raged. They were intending to stop for breath, then go on up the slope and take their posts, where Death awaited them.

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No! They will never go so far. They seek a reprieve for an instant in the tunnel, but Death comes to meet them. In the long black cavern are piles of ammunition in transit. There are soldiers, and wounded men, and mules, and general confusion. Some one, man or beast (no one knows which), hits a case of explosives. In the dark tube there is a flash, an uproar, a cloud of smoke: four hundred bodies lie mangled and scorched, as when the fire-damp explodes in the depth of a mine. The living make their way out as best they can, leaving the dead and wounded. The two hundred who escape reform their line, mount the hill, enter the real furnace: this other episode did not count. It was an extra, for good measure. The accident could not prevent the fulfilment of the task before them. What were left of the battalion went where their order sent them. Four hundred fell on the way. Too bad. Orders are orders: they are carried out by the remnant. . . .

This is only one instance in a thousand.

We all had a great curiosity to see the famous precincts where the strife raged so violently. It was almost with joy, therefore, that we re-

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ceived our call. The day the order arrived the news ran quickly through the ranks: "We are going over there, boys!" "Over there" meant Verdun. That was understood. We hastened to get ready; we arranged knapsacks; put our affairs in order. The vans were loaded, the horses hitched. In the canteens we drank to Victory, to the Return, to Good Luck. Eyes glistened behind the smoke of pipes, and we jostled and laughed. Even those who feared the terrible adventure and dreaded death concealed their uneasiness and cloaked it with smiles. On the other hand, many danced for joy, happy to have a part in the fight, to be in full action.

All together, pell-mell, happy and unhappy, we were punctually on the spot appointed for the automobiles to receive us when evening arrived. The entire convoy waited behind a hill. The drivers, muffled up in pelts, chatted while waiting for us. They looked fantastic in the dim light. Only two or three lanterns winked and blinked in the night. One was dimly aware of a file of conveyances lined up along the edge of the road, like great beasts asleep; the going to and fro of the officers of

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the convoy, and their colloquy with the colonel. It was all more felt than seen. One could distinguish only shadows; one heard the tramp of men, the dull murmur of low-voiced talking, sometimes an exclamation or a stifled oath.

Then orders were transmitted by cyclists. The first battalion set out. Hurriedly each section climbed into the autos. These ought to have carried twenty men each, but twenty-five and even thirty were piled in, somehow, with their arms, their luggage, their knapsacks, their side-bags, their canteens. As soon as a company was loaded in the captain gave the order to go. One by one the cars fell into line. The motors coughed and plunged forward like a dog unleashed. Then ten more machines received a new company, and departed in their turn. They also were swallowed up by the night.

When my turn came, by some chance I was assigned to an auto with the officers, where we were much less crowded than in the large vehicles of the privates. I therefore expected to gain some further information concerning our destination. In this I was disappointed, as the officers knew very little about it; be-

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sides, from the time the motor started and the auto was on its way no further conversation was possible. We could not hear each other, even when nearly shouting, and we had enough to do in resisting the bumps which threw us against each other. We inhaled the dust: a thick, heavy dust, raised by the wheels. It soon covered us completely. One could feel it coating his face, and small grains of sand rolled between one's fingers. We could not see, for the curtains were drawn down tightly, and it was very dark. We travelled as in an interminable tunnel, with no light whatever, with no knowledge of what we were passing or of the country we were traversing. Sometimes there were sudden stops. The quickly set brakes brought us to a standstill with a jerk. We asked the driver: "What is the matter? Where are we?" He scarcely answered, for he knew no more than we. His order was to follow the auto in front of him, and to keep his machine twenty metres behind, that he might avoid a collision in case of a too-sudden stop. He followed his orders, and knew nothing more. He did not even know the road we were travelling. The car which led the

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procession carried the chief officer of the convoy. Probably he was the only man besides our colonel who knew our destination.

Thus we journeyed four hours before dawn. As the pale light invaded our rolling apartment little by little, we saw how completely we were covered with dust. We were white from head to feet, like a miller dredged in his flour. Our clothing was white, our hair, our faces, our arms. We appeared grotesquely like veritable old men. We looked each other over and laughed. Then, as there was nothing more to fear from the dust, a lieutenant raised a curtain. We found ourselves on a winding road in a charming, gently-rolling country. Small trees formed tiny groves on the hillsides, and the whole landscape was quite different from that we had just left.

Suddenly the captain made a gesture. He had perceived an airplane, soaring directly over us in a most disquieting manner. It was flying too high for us to distinguish, even with glasses, whether it was French or German; but its manœuvres were suspicious. It had command of the road, and seemed to be preparing to fire on the convoy. In fact, that was

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exactly what happened, a few minutes later, when the flyer suddenly came lower and opened fire with his mitrailleuse. The automobiles increased their speed and lengthened the distance from one to another. Nevertheless, the aviator could move much faster than could we, and he circled above us like a vulture over his prey. Fortunately, he had no bombs, and his aim was too uncertain to inflict much damage. As it was, he wounded several men, and would have wounded many more if the special guns for the purpose had not opened fire on him, or if three French planes had not appeared on the horizon. At sight of them he made a hasty escape, amid our shouts and jeers. Our wounded were rapidly cared for by a surgeon, and shortly after were placed in the first field-hospital encountered on the road, amid the ruins of a village. This village gave us the first knowledge of our whereabouts. We were entering the valley of the Woëvre, and Verdun lay beyond the hills. The roll of the cannon had become audible.

After a short halt we set out again. This time we entered the field of action. It was evidenced by the constantly increasing number

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of convoys encountered. Long lines of camions were climbing toward the battle, loaded with munitions or food; or, like our own, with men. The road became very wide, encroaching some distance into the fields. Some soldiers, in the stream of conveyances, threw pebbles under our wheels without as much as lifting their eyes to look at us: they had seen so much already that the spectacle of troops going under fire interested them not at all.

With our advance the scene changed rapidly. We saw some autos overturned in a ditch and burning. Some dead horses stretched their rigid legs in the air. Under some tents men bustled about with stretchers, instruments, and boxes. These were the temporary dressing-stations, where the men wounded on the route were cared for: any who had met with accidents from vehicles, as well as those who had been hit by shell-splinters—for we had entered the zone of projectiles, and stray splinters reached even that far. The scene became indescribable. It was a mob, where one felt nevertheless a discipline, a sense of regulated, methodical order. We were in the side-wings of the battle, in the midst of its movable stage-

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settings, among the stage-hands, machinists, electricians, and supernumeraries, whose activities are unseen by the public, but who make it possible for the performance to go on and be brilliant. Long trains of horse-drawn caissons followed each other at full speed. Field-ambulances, marked with large red crosses, slipped into the moving stream. Vehicles of every sort, gray with dust or mud-bespattered, rumbled, creaked, rolled along, stopped, started, stuck in the ruts, freed themselves. The moving line looked like the folds of a fabulous serpent.

The voice of the cannon increased in power and volume. It was like hearing an orchestra of inferno. The ear received only a tremendous, continuous roar, like the rolling of thunder which never ceases.

We could see the earth tossed high like a geyser when a shell struck. We breathed the pungent odor of the battle. We were getting into it now. Most of the houses were demolished. The buildings still standing all bore the marks of war, with great ragged holes in walls and roof, with stains of powder and fire. Enough of them remained in close rows

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to indicate the streets leading into the town. We crossed the Meuse and found ourselves in the city. It appeared deserted. We looked curiously up and down the streets, without finding any sign of life whatever, except an occasional hurrying soldier, a cyclist, or an automobile racing at full speed between the silent houses. We made some détours, crossed squares, and skirted gardens. The whole city lay open to our view; and above the roofs the massive silhouette of the citadel spread its protecting wings.

The locking of wheels gave us a jolt: we had arrived. Glad to tread the ground once more, we leaped down and entered an abandoned factory, where we were to camp. The windows had long since lost their glass, but the roof remained. It was a fragile protection against shells, but quite adequate against wind and rain. Along the walls was stacked dirty straw, broken to crumbs by the many sleeping troops. That was our bed. It would be for many their last sleep before the sleep of death, for the orders came immediately: we would mount to the first lines at nightfall.

The march into the battle was at first simple.

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We advanced in the descending shadows, we left the town behind. Before us the heavens were streaked with the light of explosives. We marched by sections, in silence. We marched straight ahead, with heart beating quickly, mouth dry, brain a blank. In spite of myself, I set my teeth and gripped my hands. We could not distinguish the road we trod, but were dimly aware sometimes of trees stripped bare, of low ruins, of puddles of water, of general débris. We simply followed the man in front, scarcely turning the head when a flock of shells fell at the right, or left, or ahead. We only knew we were in the zone where they fell. We heard the hoarse shriek of the projectiles high in the air, and the chorus of cannon re-echoed in each breast. We no longer felt the chill of the night air. We knew not if we breathed. The farther we went, the more difficult did the walking become. We stumbled over the uneven ground, ploughed up by the shells; but we were not yet in the place of torment, and the missiles spared us. We passed many moving shadows: couriers, orderlies, estafettes, officers, wounded, we knew not what. They were only dark objects moving

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about in the night, outlined by the glow of the projectiles; instantly swallowed again by the shadows and giving place to others. We knew nothing about them. We knew only one great fact: that we were always advancing toward the fire; we were approaching the first lines, where the conflagration raged at white heat.

Then—we were in the midst of the shells. The frenzy was on. The wounded cried out. We held together the best we could. We entered chaos. Whirlwinds of explosives enveloped us. They were above, around, beneath. The very earth leaped up and lashed our faces and hands. Violent gusts of hot wind shook us. We ran. We joined some other comrades. We could not proceed in lines, but moved in groups. There were no longer any usable trenches. They were torn open, crushed in, filled up, making any advance in them impossible. Therefore we marched in the open, and we advanced. We would leap into a shell-crater, catch our breath for a second, look out for another hole, and hurl ourselves into it as quickly as possible. The rain of steel enveloped everything, in a

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tumult unbelievable. We scarcely knew if we lived; we certainly thought no more about death. The fixed, absolute, imperious idea, the only surviving thing in our consciousness, was to arrive at our destination, where we could give our service. We felt that we were near the spot and must attain it.

We often lost our way. The officers looked for the road, asked the direction, shouted orders. We understood as best we could. We ran at full speed, threw ourselves flat on the ground, sprang up and ran again. We knew only one thing: we *must* succeed in reaching our appointed post, we must reach the firing-line: we could not stop, we could not rest, until we found the location of the regiment we were sent to relieve.

For three hours we plunged across the jagged fields. The ground rose and fell and rose again. Sometimes, behind a pile of earth, we found some men. We shouted some questions. They knew nothing to tell us, as they were not of the regiment which we sought. They were out of breath, like ourselves; or they were wounded, or they had just been relieved, or they had just arrived and were themselves seeking their

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post, or they were hopelessly lost and joined in with us. If they were officers, they questioned us:

"What regiment?" "Where are you going?" "What division?" "What army?" "Have you seen such and such a regiment?" "No." "Yes, at the right." "Over at the left." "Make room there!"

Some ambulances charged past. We saw some first-aid stations in full operation, with wounded shrieking all about. Some couriers, out of breath, shouted instructions: "Go straight on. Your regiment is two hundred metres from here, near the canal."

Finally we arrived, under such a hail of bullets, machine fire, and shrapnel that we were not even conscious of danger. We found some men, half buried in holes, who went away and left us. They melted into the night.

We had reached our post on the firing-line, in an unknown plain, which seemed to be flooded with dead bodies, as a fallow field is a riot of corn-flowers and nettles. We had no idea how we had succeeded in reaching the spot.

There was nothing more to do but fight and in our turn, wait for the Relief, or for Death.

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XI

THE TOUCH OF DEATH

I HAVE no intention, in writing this work, to describe the entire war. It would be an impossible task, and I do not suppose that any author who is a contemporary of the immense tragedy would have the presumption to attempt it. To undertake such a task with success, it would be necessary to wait until many years had effaced the secondary details, leaving in the foreground only the principal facts. Then, too, each person sees the war in his own way, from his own point of view, and can relate neither the ensemble nor the particular detail after the same fashion as his neighbor. It is all a question of individuality in handling such a subject. That which one is able to tell is merely a résumé of certain brief instants lived in the furnace; in long waits, which are told by a few words, but which lasted for months. We must, then, leave to the future

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historians the literary task of enclosing in a single book the story of the events which have upset and transformed the world; as Homer's Iliad in its brief pages narrates the War of Troy, which lasted ten years. All that the writer of the present day may depict are separate minutes of the time in which we lived, and the sensations of a man who is only one of the hundred millions of combatants. Therefore I cannot add much to what I have told concerning Verdun.

We remained there four days. So short a time! and yet in this brief space a regiment melted away as the iron melts in the crucible. Four days under fire, and two battalions disappeared. When our relief came, scarcely one-third of our number survived; and of that third not one could tell clearly just what had passed. We had lived, though we knew not how, under the rain of steel, of flames, of flying earth, of splintering shells, of breaking stones; knocked about, thrown to the earth, rising only to fall again; eating little, drinking less; without sleep, without rest, battered and torn, but still clinging to our post.

Automobiles had brought us, automobiles

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took us away. We were gray with dust when we came; we went away looking like blocks of earth. Nothing about our uniforms was recognizable. Mud and clay blotched our faces and hands, matted our hair and beards, stiffened our shirts, weighed down our clothing. We had all grown old. Our eyes were sunken, our features drawn, our lassitude was extreme. Nevertheless, we almost ran when permitted to go away. We knew that the danger pursued us, and we mustered enough energy to escape. Again we ascended the hills, descended the slopes; again we saw the same spectacles we had seen in coming. It was our turn to cry to the arriving troops: "Count your bones, boys, it is getting hot!"

Yes, it was getting hot! The surging flood of Germans beat upon the French fortress like sea-breakers upon a rocky coast. The uproar increased. It seemed that the utmost limits of the possible must be reached, but each day those limits receded. Each day more cannon crashed; each day the explosions were faster and more furious; each day the storm augmented. One made his escape as from a horrible nightmare. Our ears hummed. Our

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nerves, strained to the breaking-point, vibrated and quivered like the strings of a violin. We could have dropped in our tracks from suffering and weakness.

However, an immense pride sustained our waning physical force. Mud-bespattered, thin, repulsive, we resummoned our stamina when we heard a command, at the edge of a ruined village; a general was looking at us. Instantly, backs straightened, heads lifted; bayonets were fixed on gun-barrels. Our troop, panting with exhaustion, but proud, impeccable, filed past that man, our chief, whose clear eyes were fixed upon us. We understood each other. Without words, without speech, our faces told him, "We have given our lives; 'They' have not passed!" and, without a word, his look responded: "I know it."

We had our reward. Somehow our physical pains disappeared. Our effort, our sacrifices, our fears, our wounds, had been of service; the baffled enemy was stumbling without progressing, was crumbling away. Verdun held, and behind her protecting arm France still lived.

Just the same, the time had come to seek

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the automobiles. We could not hold control of ourselves except when on our feet. The instant we stopped moving about, the instant we were seated, or reclining, no matter in what position we relaxed for a single second, we were asleep. Neither jolts, nor knocks, nor sudden stops interrupted our giant sleep. We slept without a remnant of physical sensation. We slept violently, as heavy and inert as dead men. We slept with all our body, all our heart and soul; fists clinched, mouths open; shaken about, wholly unconscious, carried away less like men than like parcels of cloth, earth, flesh, and accoutrement. We no longer had names or personality. We were nothing but clods, utterly at the end of our vitality.

Thus we crossed the country, passing bivouacs where troops were encamped, roads where convoys were mounting toward the battle-line, forests where cavalry were awaiting their call. The noise of the cannon diminished to a distant rumble, became faint, and was lost. We slept on. Occasionally, a man stretched himself, changed position, and plunged again into oblivion like the rest. Some, in their dreams, cried out disconnected words, mum-

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bled, or wept. A madman in my carriage suddenly leaped out and plunged into the blackness of the night. He was not missed until the next day. Three camions had passed over him, leaving him nothing but a mangled rag on the road.

At last we reached our destination, and came to life again. A camp was ready to receive us—a camp so new and fresh we thought it almost elegant. There were Adrian barracks* of unpainted spruce, with water for drinking and water for washing; with coffee prepared, fresh bread, hot soup, and abundance of clean straw. We knew that the horrible inferno was at an end for us; at evening a train would take us each to his own family to enjoy a furlough.

To come out of the abyss of hell and arrive at his own hearthside is an emotion too deep for a mortal man. He knows not if he is living in reality or in a dream. He goes on mechanically. He is hairy, barbarous, dirty, hideous. He is black, and torn, and bruised, and ragged. He reeks of powder, blood, and earth. He

* Adrian barracks are made in sections, which enables them to be put up or taken down quickly.—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE.

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trembles. He is conscious of a sensation of joy—he feels it without comprehending it.

Before long the train will be in the station. His wife will be there with his mother, his father, and others who are dear. They will take him in their arms. They will hold him, they will press him to their hearts. He will feel the sweet thrill of their touch; he will receive their caresses, will hear the familiar voices. His heart beats fast. A feeling of faintness sweeps over him; he puts his hand before his eyes. He speaks to his neighbor. He laughs. He drinks a little, he smokes. He suddenly feels smothered. It must be his great-coat which bothers him; he pulls it off. He holds imaginary conversations with himself. He gesticulates. He recounts what he has seen, what he has done, what he has said; the death of his comrades, the frightful wounds of his dearest friends. He strives to classify his recollections; he yawns, he gives it up. The battle still crowds his brain, obsesses him, holds him, fills his entire consciousness. The other men are like himself. Some laugh, some sing, some sleep.

The special train rolls away—passes stations,

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traverses pleasant country, arrives at towns, whistles, snorts, runs smoothly, flies over the rails, carries him on and on. The man is dumb with amazement: a field where reapers are binding the grain enchants him; a glimpse of a garden where a woman is hanging up washing moves him to tenderness. A house intact astonishes him. The panorama passes before his window, is gone, is repeated. It is not yet the country, the province, where he was born, but that is approaching. Familiar names are seen at the stopping-places along the track. In an hour the train will reach his station. He can no longer sit still. He rises, fusses with his clothing, sits down, gets up again. The train no longer is going fast enough. It is stopping. What for? Now it goes again. Good. There it is stopping again! This is deadly. Villainous train! Villainous trip! Villainous life!

At last it is his own country, his own town, his own station . . . and the train is stopping! Yes, the family are all there, running to meet him. The man leaves the carriage; he falls into their arms; he leans on their shoulders. Tears are on his cheeks; his mind is benumbed,

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he can only look. There is father, there is mother, there is wife and child.

"Well, well! How are you?"

"Ah, yes, all right,"—somewhat abstractedly.

He pulls himself together, recovers his strength and composure. He stands erect, proudly. He is bruised, stained, and dirty; a dreadful object, at once repulsive and sublime. He is in the midst of his doting, distracted family, who forget all the questions they had planned to ask about himself and the war, and can only ask: "Are you hungry? are you thirsty? are you warm?" He does not know if he is or not. He feels no need of anything. He goes with them. He recognizes the land, the road, the trees, and the houses. He breathes deeply. What delicious air! He is hurried along. As he passes the neighbors exclaim:

"There he is!"

He is safe and whole, he is brave and noble. He wears on his breast the Croix de Guerre. He is petted. He is washed and cleaned and mended and taken out for a promenade. He tries to tell his story, but he tells it badly: he has not the words for it. He knows not how

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to express all the misery endured, the bodily suffering, the horror of the battle. He tells little fragments of stories, and already he is forgetting the most terrible features. The struggle which was beyond all comprehension seems small when he tries to recount it. It becomes nothing more than a local fight with grenades, a patch of ground occupied in the night, a brook crossed—a thing of shadow and of mystery. It is no longer grandiose. It really was a catastrophe: it becomes a mere fist fight. However, they listen, they ask questions. He must repeat and go into detail. And he, who has escaped the jaws of death, who by a miracle has come out of the destruction, who feels with strangeness the new pulses of life, he runs about to see his friends, he shakes the burden from his thought, he amuses himself—and finally is aware that the time has passed like a flash of lightning and he must again depart. Then the anguish again lays hold upon him; for that which he could not tell clearly he knows only too well. No fibre of his being has forgotten it. His flesh creeps at the thought of entering again the bath of blood, of noise, of war; the long vigils in the

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trench, the whistle of the shells, the infantry attack.

He goes to join his regiment. He is loaded with delicacies, tobacco, and presents. He has new socks on his feet and a new sweater on his back. He is made over, he is a man again. He is sad, but he goes: there is no other way.

Once more he is at the front with all its horrors. He is in a sector of great commotion, where ruins pile upon ruins; where the very earth under his feet explodes; where a fresh drive is being pushed; where no minute is without its danger. There is the patrol toward the enemy's lines, the life underground, the sky shot with airplanes, the shrapnel overhead and the mine under feet. There is the torpedo coming with its ugly growl; there are all the changing forms in which death beckons—the Grim Monster which prowls and shrieks; there is the agony renewed.

The attack is resumed. The attack, yes. "C'est la Guerre." There is no longer, as in former days, a battle of a single day, wherein one is either victor or vanquished, where the outcome is decisive. The attack of to-day is

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one of the rôles in the drama of life, like being a soldier. Yes, it is life itself.

We made an attack, then, on a certain day, toward Mont Cornillet, which stood out before us like a volcano of chalk. The German and French artillery were crossing their shell-fire. Below, the French were holding. The position was hardly tenable after it was gained, and we were trying to enlarge and strengthen it a bit. My regiment, entirely reformed and equipped, formed a part of the advancing force. Each man, grown wise from his experience in war, could estimate the distance, and the effect of the firing. It was going well. It was hard, but the firing was good. Perhaps we would suffer less this time than on former occasions. Perhaps once more we would return alive. But then, what matter? One is a fatalist in such moments. Destiny will decide. A man is nothing, can do nothing. He is a mere atom, a drop of water in the ocean, a grain of sand in the desert. He goes where the wind drives him. If he is lucky, he comes back alive; if he is unlucky, he returns to the bosom of the earth. It is all very simple, clear, and clean-cut. The sacrifice was made long since. Once for all, the

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very first time, he has said: "What will come, will come." He has left his home, he has marched, he has fought, he has suffered. Some men have been killed, others only await their turn. Infinite Fatality holds them in her hand. Those who believe in God, and that God brings solace, have their comfort always with them. They piously attend religious service when they can, wherever the chaplain sets up his altar: in a crushed-in chapel of a demolished village, or in a barn without a roof, or in the trench itself. The man who believes in nothing has no greater fear of death.

Certainly, were it not for the war, one would have lived otherwise. One would have lived in a world of work, with its pains and pleasures, founding a family and rearing his children. One would have lived as lived his father; one would have had a wife like his mother; one would have pursued happiness. But this dream is one of peace. Now, "C'est la Guerre." The giant struggle passes the control of men, and its unknown end is still far off. One no longer fights merely for his home, his land, his own well-being. One feels that these things have become dwarfed in the tremendous world

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tragedy, and that at the foundation it has to do with great principles, ideals, and human destiny.

The soldier in action does not see so far. The immediate, the concrete, demand his close scrutiny; but he feels that the war is waged for all the human race, and that his blood will not flow in vain. Emancipation is coming. Man is throwing aside autocratic authority; he has reached his age of majority and wishes to be free. Society impels and guides him. He is no longer the soldier of a people, he is the soldier of a principle. He fights for the triumph of ideals that are noble, ideals that are just, ideals that are free. He assists at the ghastly death-throes of an autocracy which can live only through his enslavement. He knows the price of a revolution: some men must die that others may live. He accepts it. He knows not just how great must be his sacrifice. He knows only that he is resigned.

I saw all this among my comrades. I gathered it in their discussions: for we talk, at the front. The squad argues, reads the newspapers, makes its comments, follows the trend of events when it can. But—when the "Coup de Chien"

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comes; when the unit enters an engagement; when one fills his cartridge-box or receives his case of grenades; when one goes over the top, to storm the enemy's parapets and rush to the assault, all else disappears, is wiped out. There remains only exaltation and the act of the moment—a sacrament.

The zero hour is passed from one to another in advance. The attack will be at ten o'clock. A half-hour before, each man is in his place. The artillery fire is redoubled. The German knows that his last minutes have come. As for ourselves, we are attentive and impatient. The anguish of the drive puts our nerves on a tension; eyes take on a hard look, hands grip convulsively. One wishes he could start, leap to the surface, cross No Man's Land on the run, and drop into the opposite trench. The half-hour drags on slowly.

The hour strikes. With one leap, furiously, the first wave bounds forward, spreads, and crosses the intervening space. The second line follows. We of the next line look and listen. They cry out—they go on—they are running—they arrive! We start. The others are already upon the German. The grenades

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crackle and snap. The machine-guns spit, the airplanes hum, the shells burst. Forward, forward! We run at full speed. Each knows his rôle. Each knows his act, his allotted piece of work. Each is strangely lucid. The movement is admirable. All is going well, everything is working out with precision. We will gain our point. With an infallible glance the soldier knows the outcome, and in that moment he judges his chief without error, without appeal.

The trench is taken. The shelters are crushed in, the dead are lying all about. Pale and haggard prisoners run toward us, huddled together with up-lifted arms to give themselves up:

"Gut Franzose! Kamarad! Polones, Polones!"

They are Poles: big and little, tall and short; a whole troop. They shrink, now. They would like to run. They are anxious to get away from the place, for the miserable creatures cling to life and fear the shells, their own shells, the German shells, which follow each other in gusts. We drive them on. They go as captives. Three pass, a Frenchman follows, then

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three more prisoners and another Frenchman, with gun ready. The procession follows the wrecked trench, leaps over the débris, reaches the open space between our lines. Now there is less danger. The prisoners are parcelled off by twenties and are led to the rear. They stop at the first post where wounded are cared for. The stretchers are taken up and carried by the same men who made the wounds, by these men now quite docile, who, dressed in dirty gray made still more dirty by the ground, march with their burden, fearful, but at heart happy: for them the war is over.

It will continue for their conquerors who still live. Death has once more made her choice. The prisoners are safe. Those others who took them will die perhaps to-morrow, on this same ground or on another. Satiated to-day, the Grim Monster is reserving them: they are kept for a coming feast of death.

How well they know it! but they care not at all. They are tired and happy. They wander about the captured trench and gather up little nothings: fragments of clothing, pieces of arms, splinters of cartridges. They go to and fro; or, impassive, they choose a corner and go to

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sleep, indifferent to the shells, to the battle which is dying out; indifferent to to-day and to-morrow.

They know their task is accomplished.

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